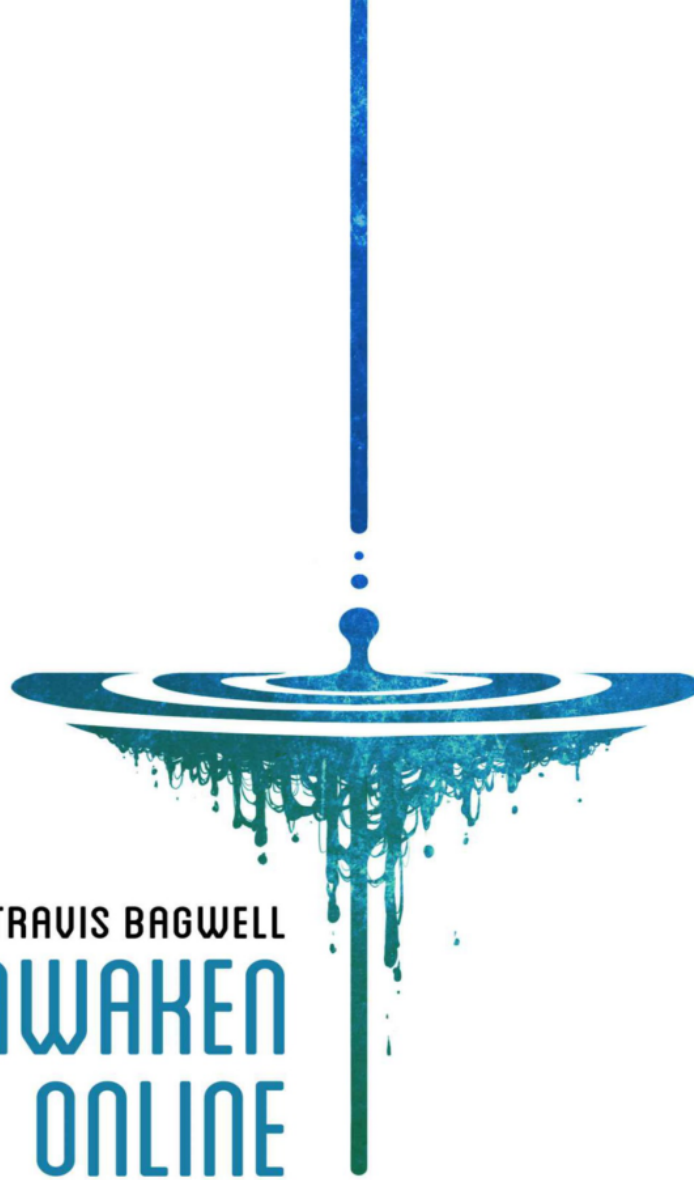


TRAVIS BAGWELL

AWAKEN ONLINE

SIDE QUEST : APATHY

Awaken Online

Side Quest: Apathy

Travis Bagwell

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Who doesn’t love a black sheep?

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Chapter 1 - Pressured

October 8, 2076: 4 days after the release of Awaken Online.

The sizzle and pop of the hamburger meat cooking on the stove was the only sound that could be heard in the kitchen. Eliza stirred the mixture distractedly and then turned back to the small bowl in front of her that she was using to mix various herbs and spices.

1 Tablespoon of chili powder, ¼ teaspoon of garlic powder, ¼ teaspoon onion powder… Eliza mentally cataloged and checked off the list of ingredients that went into the seasoning, her hands automatically measuring and pouring the powders with military precision.

Once the mixture was complete, she stirred it gently and then added it to the pan. She enjoyed this process. It was well-practiced and comforting. She felt like she was building something. Besides, chemistry had always been one of her favorite subjects.

That thought made her wince, and Eliza glanced at the kitchen table nearby where an imposing stack of books stood in a haphazard column. She knew that cooking dinner was just a distraction. She should be studying. Always studying.

She shook her head to clear it. Her parents weren't home yet, and cooking served multiple purposes – both to distract herself and to ward off the inevitable questions for at least a few minutes. Pushing her glasses back where they rested on the bridge of her nose, Eliza spared a glance at the clock over the stove. She only had a few minutes until her parents would arrive home for the evening. She hadn't even made the guacamole yet.

Eliza lowered the temperature on the electric stove and removed a set of shears from a drawer beside her. Making her way around the kitchen island, she opened the door leading to the backyard.

Weak rays of waning sunlight just barely crested the wooden fence that ringed the yard as she walked around the house to the small garden in the side yard. Choosing her steps carefully, her bare feet landed on a series of paving stones set between the neat rows of growing vegetables. Eliza scanned her garden carefully as she walked, noting the state of each plant.

Plucking a ripened tomato, she noticed that the caterpillars had been hungry – leaving miniature bite marks in the leaves. She would

need to use some pesticide before long, but she was always reluctant to use a store-bought product for fear that it would harm the vegetables or accidentally kill something besides the pests that occasionally plagued her garden. Maybe she could search online for a more natural solution.

She spent the next few minutes collecting vegetables, quickly realizing she had forgotten to bring something to carry her produce back into the house. With a resigned sigh, she used the bottom of her t-shirt as a makeshift bag.

When Eliza re-entered the house, the smell of spices immediately assaulted her nose. She reveled in the sensation as she unloaded her stash on the counter and began washing the vegetables and herbs. Her momentary euphoria was interrupted a moment later when she heard a door close on the opposite end of the house. Her parents' voices could be heard drifting down the hallway as they bickered and discussed their day.

As they entered the kitchen, Eliza's father breathed in deeply. "It smells amazing in here. Let me guess, tacos?"

"Yes," Eliza replied with a smile of her own. She just wanted to keep them talking about food. "Some of my herbs needed to be groomed back. They were starting to overgrow their planters."

Eliza's mother set her bag down on the table and inspected her daughter critically, her gaze lingering on Eliza's dirt-covered shirt. "I really wish you wouldn't ruin your clothes carrying in vegetables from your garden."

Eliza turned her gaze back to the stove, her eyes downcast. "I'm sorry. I forgot to take a basket out with me. Dinner is almost ready, though."

Her mother sighed. "Thank goodness. I'm starving." She sat down at the kitchen island and watched Eliza as she finished with her preparations. "I didn't have time to eat lunch," her mother continued in a tired voice. "Apparently, there is a new flu epidemic going around. The pediatric wing was full of wailing children and impatient mothers."

Eliza's father walked back into the kitchen, having deposited his personal belongings in his office. "It was a rather frantic day on my end too. We had a gunshot victim come in today."

Her mother grimaced and rubbed at her eyes. "Well, maybe I should be thankful then."

Eliza half-listened to their conversation as she finished cooking. It was the same story, just a different day. Her mother and father were both doctors and worked at the local hospital. Her father was an anesthesiologist, and her mother worked in pediatrics. It was typical for them to come home tired and grousing – usually with a terrible

story to go along with it.

"And here you go," Eliza said, setting down two plates on the island in front of them.

"Why don't we eat at the table," her father suggested. Eliza flinched as she saw him glance over at the books that were piled on the kitchen table. "Or, maybe not…" he added with a chuckle.

Then the dreaded question came. "So how are your studies coming along?" her mother asked. It was always the same question. Every day for the last… well, she had actually lost track.

"It's going okay," Eliza said noncommittally, standing on the other side of the counter and picking at the tacos on her plate.

"Did your practice test results come in yet?" her mother pressed, dabbing at her lips with a napkin. "It's been over a week since the last one."

"They did," Eliza said, her eyes fixed on her food. "I scored in the 90th percentile on the college admissions exams, and I scored a 493 on the MCAT practice test."

Her father frowned slightly. "90th percentile? What was the score on the admissions exam?"

Eliza hesitated slightly before responding, "2136 between the various categories."

"That's ten points lower than your previous exam, isn't it?" her mother asked sharply.

"Yes," Eliza replied in a subdued voice. "I think I was tired on the last exam day."

Her father jumped in, trying to lighten the tone, "Well, you scored two points higher on the MCAT. At least you're making progress!"

Eliza glanced at her mother and saw her nodding grudgingly. "Yes, yes. You are coming along. Another six or seven months and you will be ready to take the real admissions exam. While your MCAT is still a little low, I'm sure it will pick up once you start taking college classes."

"Clairmont has a fantastic physics program, and I know you struggle with that a bit," her father added. "I'm sure with some additional prep you will be in the top 10% in no time."

Fighting down the urge to sigh, Eliza's attention returned to her dinner. She was set to graduate from her high school this year, and her whole future already seemed set in stone. She would attend a prestigious four-year university, followed by an equally prestigious medical school. Then she could begin her residency. Again, only a top-of-the-line hospital would do. Maybe ten years later she would be a practicing doctor. Just like her parents.

Eliza had no idea what she wanted to do with her life, but one

thing was abundantly clear. She had absolutely no desire to become a doctor.

With her eyes leveled on the counter, Eliza didn't notice her father watching her, a look of concern in his eyes. "Are you alright?" he asked finally. Eliza glanced up at him in surprise. "It just feels like lately, you have been a little… off. You don't talk about your garden or your schoolwork unless we pester you."

"We know that we've been pushing you hard, but it's only because we care about you," her mother added. Then she hesitated and looked at her husband. "On the other hand, we both understand what it means to feel a little burnt out."

"You wouldn't believe the number of all-nighters we had to pull to make it through med school," her father added with a rumbling chuckle.

"I…" Eliza hesitated. She wanted to be honest with them and tell them she had no interest in med school and that she hated the constant prep courses and practice tests, but she knew what they would say. She needed to think about her future and her career. She could already visualize the look of disappointment in their eyes. Then they would ask what she wanted to do instead.

She didn't have an answer.

"I'm fine," Eliza finally squeaked out, taking another bite to avoid elaborating.

A frown creased her father's lips. "Hmm. Well, in any event, we wanted to reward you for working so hard." He stood and stepped into the other room for a moment before returning with a box covered in wrapping paper.

"We've heard that this is all the rage with kids your age," her mother added. "It isn't my sort of thing, but your father convinced me you might enjoy it."

Eliza looked on with curiosity. First, her parents were showing interest in her personal life – which was unusual for them. Now they were buying her presents? For a brief moment, she considered whether aliens might have abducted them and replaced them with more kind-hearted doppelgangers.

"Go on, open it," her father urged. Grudgingly, Eliza's fingers peeled away the wrapping paper that covered the box. The logo on the side of the container swiftly appeared, with the words "Cerillion Entertainment" emblazoned across the surface. A picture of a black obelisk and a full-faced plastic helmet was showcased on the box.

Eliza wasn't exactly a social butterfly – not that she wanted to hang out with the uptight and high-strung kids from her prep courses. However, she knew this was a set of virtual reality equipment. She had heard a number of kids at school talking about the new game

Cerillion Entertainment had released recently, and many of her classmates had been begging their parents to buy it for them.

"We also bought you a copy of this new game that's causing such a stir," her mother said, chewing distastefully on the word "game" for a moment. "I believe it's called Awaken Online."

"A bunch of the guys at work mentioned that their kids are really into it," her father added with a shrug. "It also has a time compression feature, so we thought maybe it would be a good way for you to relax without taking too much time away from your studies."

And there it was. She could relax, but not if it came at the cost of study time.

"Maybe you could also meet some other people," her mother suggested gently. "Most of your friends don't stop by anymore."

Of course not. Who would want to come over and study vocabulary words or do physics problems every evening, Eliza thought morosely.

She realized that both of her parents were watching her, waiting for a reaction. She forced a small smile onto her face, pushing at her glasses again with her finger. "This looks fun," she said, trying to put some enthusiasm into her voice. "Maybe I'll try it out later tonight after I get done with my homework."

"About that," her father said, glancing at her mother. "Why don't you take the next couple weeks off from your preparatory classes and just focus on your regular schoolwork? You've made a lot of progress, and it doesn't hurt to take a break every once in a while."

Eliza glanced at her mother and noted the disagreement in her eyes. Was this something her father was pushing? Why? Regardless, she didn't want to argue. If she had an excuse not to work on these grueling exercises every day, she was going to take it.

"Really?" Eliza replied. When her parents nodded in agreement, she continued, "Then maybe I'll go set it up now. Thank you for the present." She needed to leave quickly before they changed their minds.

She picked up the box and started to lug it toward the staircase leading to the house's second floor. As she made it to the stairs, she realized she wasn't carrying a copy of the game. Maybe there had been another package she missed? Setting the box down carefully, she padded back toward the kitchen, her feet making barely a whisper on the hardwood floor.

Her parents' voices drifted down the hall, and Eliza stopped to listen. "This is a distraction, James," her mother said. "This isn't the time for her to slow down in her studies. The real exams are just around the corner."

A long silence followed before her father spoke. His normally deep, full voice sounded distracted. "I know, but you should have seen

that kid that came in today. He tried to kill himself." Another pause. "His parents were beside themselves. I saw them crying in the lounge."

"I… I know," her mother replied. "But Eliza isn't suicidal. She seems to be doing fine."

"Fine?" her father repeated. "You said it yourself. She has no friends. She doesn't do anything but study. She has always been quiet, but lately, she has almost entirely stopped talking to us."

This was met with another long silence as Eliza stood still and listened. "I'm not saying she is going to kill herself," her father finally said. "But she doesn't seem happy. What are two weeks in the grand scheme of things?"

"I hope you're right," her mother replied. "Of course, I want what's best for Eliza. That has always been the case."

Did her parents really think she was suicidal? Then she hesitated. If she were honest with herself, she had felt off these last few weeks. Or was it months? She hated the constant tests. She didn't want to become a doctor. There also wasn't anyone to turn to. Her parents wouldn't understand. She just felt… *numb*. The only times she felt more like her old self was when she was cooking or working in her garden.

Eliza decided she didn't want to hear any more. She retreated to the stairs and glumly plucked the box from the floor. A moment later, she entered her room and sat down heavily on her bed, her eyes lingering on the package beside her. She didn't know what to think anymore. Maybe her parents were right. Maybe she did need a break.

Acting on an impulse, Eliza began to unbox the equipment and set it up by her bedside. As she pulled out the helmet, a note fluttered out. Her father's chicken scratch handwriting was scrawled across the paper. "I've already installed the game for you," the note read. "You just need to open the door in the waiting room."

Eliza looked at the helmet in her hands, her fingers tracing the thick plastic. She had played a few video games – who hadn't? But she had never gotten sucked in. The games had always felt hollow and dull after a few hours. Did people really enjoy performing a mind-numbing series of silly quests or talking to NPCs that voiced scripted lines on a repeating loop? And she could play yet another generic class that essentially made her identical to the millions of other people playing the same game.

However, her classmates had all said that Awaken Online was different. "Life-changing" was a phrase she had heard tossed around. She didn't really feel either excited or nervous about playing the game, but she supposed she didn't have anything to lose by trying.

Tugging the helmet over her head, Eliza laid back on her bed. A

blue screen immediately popped up in her field of view.

System Initializing

Scanning User...Please Wait

She blinked, and, when she opened her eyes again, she found herself standing in a pristine circular white room. She stumbled slightly – disoriented by the change in perspective. Yet it only took her a moment or two to adjust to the change. She looked down at her arm in puzzlement. This was her digital body now? It felt oddly easy to control her movements.

Eliza inspected the room, noting a single lone door standing across from her. She slowly walked towards it. As she approached, she could see that ornate scrollwork had been etched in the wood. Fantastic creatures and shining knights writhed across its surface.

Her hand rested on the knob, and she hesitated one last time. She didn't know what to expect or what she hoped to find. Was there even any point in trying this game? Maybe her mother was right – she should just log out and study. With a resigned sigh, she started to turn away. At that moment, the door creaked open slightly, light spilling through the crack.

Then the world went black.

Chapter 2 - Decisive

Eliza blinked rapidly as blinding light flooded her vision. As her eyes adjusted, she realized she was now standing in a fantastic garden. Sunlight streamed into the enclosure, gleaming off the emerald, dew-studded leaves of the hedges that ringed the courtyard. Rose bushes lined the space in neat rows and the pink, red, and white blossoms stood out vividly.

Eliza looked up, covering her eyes to blot out the sun. She could see puffy white clouds drifting languidly through a crystalline blue sky. Insects chirped happily inside the garden, and the warm sunlight lingered on her skin. Rubbing her arm, she realized that she could actually feel the sensation, her sense of touch almost indistinguishable from real life.

"This is a game?" she whispered to herself.

After she had a chance to collect her thoughts, Eliza inspected the courtyard more closely. The rigid branches of the rose bushes had intertwined to form a flat table-like surface above each of the rows. On these tables rested all manner of objects. Although, *junk* might have been a more accurate description. Eliza strolled down the nearest row, eying the tables skeptically. A sword. A handkerchief. A harp. A lamp. There didn't seem to be any rhyme or reason to the motley collection.

After walking up and down several of the aisles, Eliza finally came to a stop. What was she supposed to do in this garden? What was the point of this?

"There really isn't much of a point to anything, is there? Silly question if you ask me," said a voice. Eliza jumped in surprise and whirled, trying to find the speaker.

"But, of course, you didn't ask me, did you?" the voice continued with a note of amusement. Eliza could distinctly hear that the sound came from the end of the row of bushes. Stepping forward carefully, she peered around the edge of the table.

A young man lay on the ground, his eyes closed. He must have been in his mid-twenties. Thick stubble covered his chin, and his clothes appeared to be made of a chaotic collection of multi-colored rags. Rough sandals adorned his feet, and their straps crisscrossed up his calves. The man's head rested against an enormous woolen object that appeared to be an over-sized pillow. Eliza couldn't help but think that he looked like one of the people in her history books – particularly from the 1970s. He looked a bit like either a hippie or,

quite possibly, a homeless person. She couldn't decide which.

"It's rude to stare," the young man said without opening his eyes.

"I…I'm sorry," Eliza replied.

"It's even more rude to judge someone you've just met," he continued, peeking at her with one half-lidded eye.

"But I didn't…" Eliza trailed off and then realized she hadn't actually spoken. She had only been thinking he looked homeless. The Hippie had also picked up on her thoughts earlier when she had wondered about the point of the garden.

"Wait. Can you read my mind?" Eliza asked in confusion.

"Such as it is, I suppose. I've never given it much thought," he said, yawning widely. "If not for you thinking so *loudly*, I would have continued to nap here."

"Um, well… I'm sorry?" Eliza replied, unsure if thinking was something she should really be apologizing for. She could only guess that the man must be part of the game world if he was able to pick up on her thoughts. She glanced around at the garden. "What is this place?"

"Great question. *This* is a garden," the Hippie replied with a deadpan expression.

Eliza just stared at him for a few seconds before trying again. "What I mean is where is this garden located? Are we in the game?"

The hippie sighed and looked at his fluffy black pillow mournfully. "I guess a nap is out of the question now. That second question is a tricky one. Isn't everything a game? Or a test, or a quiz, or a trial?" He tapped his chin thoughtfully. "Life's a game I suppose. We just don't understand the rules. Deep, huh?"

"Are you being deliberately difficult?" Eliza asked, exasperation coloring her voice.

A wide smile crept across the Hippie's face. "Not deliberately, no. You'll just have to accept that it's part of my nature."

He stretched his arms over his head and then looked at Eliza appraisingly again. "In this case, the rules are simple. Pick an object. Any object." He waved at the rows of tables behind Eliza dismissively.

"To what end?" Eliza inquired. She wasn't sure she understood the point of this game – if that was even what this was about.

The Hippie rubbed at his chin. "Now that's another good question. I think there's some significant disagreement about the answer. Live for the sake of living? Seems a bit circular to me. Life is the pursuit of happiness? That one seems rather vague. What is *happiness* anyway? I've asked the Gambler many times, and he refuses to give me a straight answer."

He sighed wistfully before continuing. "Then there are the

spiritual and religious interpretations, but I understand there's some disagreement there. Or maybe it's all just a big toss-up."

The Hippie shook his head. "Seems like there are too many options and no clear answers. See? This is why I choose to nap. Much more comforting than all of these pesky questions." The hippie turned to his pillow and asked, "Wouldn't you agree, Fluffy?"

Eliza was just about to ask another question – this time focused on the young man's sanity – when she saw the pillow move. It rose onto four legs and turned to face the Hippie, its sleepy eyes observing him carefully. Eliza immediately realized she was looking at a sheep. A very black sheep.

The sheep – whose name must be Fluffy – let out a bleat and licked the Hippie's face. "See!" the Hippie said to Eliza, "Fluffy always enjoys our naps. Much more relaxing than these in-depth philosophical questions you keep asking."

The sheep shuffled over to Eliza and inspected her cautiously. She reflexively reached out a hand and petted him absently as she looked at the pair in confusion. What on earth was going on here? Was she really playing Awaken Online? Who was this crazy young man and his black sheep?

She tried to collect her thoughts. She was just starting the game, so this must be some type of initiation or starting area. She had heard enough from listening to her classmates to know that the character creation process in the game was a little unusual.

"If I choose an item from the garden, then I can leave?" Eliza asked carefully. Maybe if she completed whatever this was, she could move on to the real game.

"Yep. Just pick an object." Then the young man hesitated. "There was something important about the item, though." After a moment he shrugged. "It probably isn't a big deal. Let us know when you've made your selection!"

Fluffy licked Eliza's hand appreciatively and then laid back down. The Hippie rested his head back against the sheep's stomach, and the pair promptly closed their eyes. Within seconds, she could hear soft snoring sounds coming from them.

Eliza closed her eyes too – except she was attempting to suppress her frustration. She took a deep breath and then glanced around the garden. She began walking back between the rows of tables and re-examining the objects that littered their surfaces in large piles.

From the Hippie's ramblings, she was guessing that the items were important. They probably determined how she would start out in the game world. A sword for a fighting character, woodworking tools for a crafter, *etc.* Although she saw a number of items that made her

think twice about her hypothesis. For example, she found a spoon on one table – just a spoon. On another, she found a small pocket watch. That punched some holes in her theory, but it was the best she had to go on.

Eliza spent a considerable amount of time walking between the tables and examining each object carefully. After what felt like hours, she was rewarded with a blue skill notification:

> **New Passive Skill: Identification**
> You have spent a long time looking at various items. And we mean a *long* time. The result is that you are better able to observe the traits of objects you find. At higher levels, you may be able to discover hidden traits of items and monsters.
> **Skill Level:** Beginner Level 1
> **Effect:** Allows the user to identify unknown objects or reveal hidden information. Higher levels increase the information that is revealed.

The skill was interesting, but it didn't help with her current problem. She had no idea which object to pick. None of the items appealed to her. They were all either silly, useless, or felt like they would come with tradeoffs. Uncertain what to do, Eliza made her way back to the corner of the garden where she had found the Hippie.

She discovered him still nestled up to Fluffy, a little drool pooling at the corner of his mouth. Eliza coughed in an attempt to wake the man. When that didn't work, she coughed a little louder. Still nothing. Then she sighed and sat down with her back to one of the hedges that ringed the garden. Her thoughts were somewhat morose. Even in a game, she had no idea what she wanted to do.

Her gaze drifted across a nearby rose bush. The leaves of this shrub were beginning to turn brown and looked dry. She plucked a leaf, pressing it between her fingers. It promptly crumbled under her touch. Then she stuck her finger into the soil beneath the plant and noticed it was extremely damp.

She glanced at the Hippie. "You're over watering your garden," she muttered. "This plant looks like it has root rot."

The young man's eyes shot open, and he sat up. "You know what? That's a great point. Are you a gardener yourself?" Fluffy stirred restlessly and then glared at the Hippie with an accusing expression.

Eliza looked at him in surprise, taken aback by his reaction. "I-I guess so. I have a small garden of my own."

The young man looked at her carefully. "Interesting.

Interesting. You know what? You would be perfect."

"Um. Perfect for what?" Eliza asked cautiously.

The Hippie spread his arms wide. "For my trail of course! Wait, no. That's not it. Road? Boulevard? Aisle?" He glanced at his sheep. "Do you remember, Fluffy?"

The sheep gave the Hippie a long-suffering look and bleated softly in response.

"Ahh, I've got it. My *path*."

"What about your path?" Eliza asked in confusion.

"You would be perfect for it," he replied with a wave of his hand. "Didn't I say that?"

She suppressed another sigh. "No. I mean yes. You did, but what is your path?"

"The Path of Water, of course," the Hippie explained with a wide grin. He scooted around so that he was sitting beside her, and then nudged Eliza with his elbow conspiratorially. "It's supposed to be a secret, but it's about acceptance."

Eliza started to ask him what on earth he was talking about and then just shook her head. It wouldn't help to keep asking him questions when she knew he was incapable of giving her a straight answer.

"Uh, I think I'm okay," she said and started to edge away from him.

"You're better than okay!" the Hippie replied. "Here, I'll show you!" With a wave of his hand, a notification abruptly appeared in Eliza's vision.

Quest Completed: Initiation

You have shown yourself to be a thoughtful and complex thinker. You were also nice to Fluffy and provided invaluable gardening advice. However, the test administrator noted that you are a little indecisive, so he is going to help you out with that.

Your alignment has been set to True-Neutral
You have been awarded +5 to Willpower
You have been awarded +5 to Intelligence
Path of Water Unlocked
Attention of the Great Black Sheep

Eliza just stared at the notification, not certain how to respond

to the strange prompt. She had gained the attention of the "Great Black Sheep?" Was that this strange homeless man beside her or Fluffy? Or both?

"I don't think you understand," Eliza began. "I don't really…"

The Hippie interrupted her, "This is a great honor. You should be *honored*. Shouldn't she, Fluffy?" The sheep snorted and didn't bother looking up this time. "See, Fluffy approves too!"

"But I don't…" Eliza tried again.

"…know how to get started. Don't worry! I've got you covered." With that, the young man waved his hand and the game world around Eliza began to disintegrate. "Toodles!" He called out before the world went dark again.

Chapter 3 - Enlisted

"You lot need to keep moving," a gruff voice shouted.

Eliza was disoriented from the sudden change in scenery and observed the area around her cautiously. She was now standing in a small courtyard with a large group of other players. Each person wore a homespun cotton shirt and trousers. They also seemed equally dumbstruck at being suddenly dropped in a new location.

"Are you all dumb or deaf?" the surly person shouted again. "Get your asses moving!"

Eliza pushed at her glasses with her finger – the one item that she hadn't lost upon entering the game – and looked toward the source of the yelling. A portly man wearing heavy leather armor was gesturing toward the entrance to the courtyard while watching the players in irritation. A longsword dangled from his hip, the hilt gleaming in the sunlight.

Not wanting to cause a scene, Eliza decided to listen to the surly man. She moved forward, slinking past the other milling players and guards without making eye contact. As soon as she stepped through the entrance to the courtyard, a multi-colored tear formed in the air behind her and another group of confused players appeared in the courtyard with a small popping sound.

Is this a starting area? she wondered.

Eliza soon found herself slowly moving along a cobblestone street behind a group of other new players. The milling throng of people all wearing the same clothing made for an odd sight, drawing looks from the local townsfolk – who she assumed were NPCs. She had been deposited by the Hippie in what appeared to be some sort of medieval town. The structures around her were made of wood and towered three and four stories into the air. They were all connected at various points by crisscrossing platforms and staircases.

"So, what do we want to do first?" a young man ahead of her asked his group. "Maybe stop by the training grounds or should we go pick a profession?"

"I'm planning to go get some combat training," the girl beside him replied. "I've heard a bunch of horror stories about players just running out of the starting town and immediately getting owned by a group of monsters."

Another player snorted. "How hard could it be? It's just another game. Besides, I hate tutorials. I say we skip it."

"I don't know… I heard combat feels pretty realistic," the first

speaker added. “That’s why everyone else here is heading to the training grounds.”

Eliza didn’t exactly share their optimism about learning combat skills. And she definitely didn’t have any interest in becoming some sort of warrior – or in fighting monsters for that matter. At the next fork in the road, she turned away from the group, heading further into the interior of the city.

A few minutes later, her wanderings found her on the far edge of town. Her breath caught in her throat at the sight that awaited her. The city had been built on a cliff face overlooking a bay. Sunlight sparkled off the water far below her. Wooden ramps and makeshift lifts led down the side of the cliff, terminating in a dock below where dozens of ships swayed gently in the water.

“This is a port city?” Eliza murmured.

“Aye lass,” a voice said from beside her. “This is Falcon’s Hook. Didn’t they explain that in the courtyard where you appeared?” She turned and found an old man resting against the railing, eyeing her clothing skeptically. He wore a coarse robe and a cane rested against his leg. “You *are* a traveler, aren’t you?”

Eliza looked down at her hands as she replied, “The man in the beginning courtyard was a bit gruff. He didn’t explain much of anything.”

“Well, I can help you there,” the man replied happily, gesturing at the bay. “This here is one of the largest ports on the Silver Coast. We have a thriving market since we’re a stopping point for merchants traveling north and south along the coast.”

He gestured back the way Eliza had come. “Most of the new travelers head to the training grounds near the city’s gate. They have you lot beat on some stuffed mannequins and such until you’re ready for bigger game.”

“Is… is there somewhere else I could go?” Eliza asked.

The man eyed her carefully. “Not looking forward to swinging a sword, huh? That’s not a problem. There’s room for all sorts here. Maybe you should consider checking out the market. Just head north – you can’t miss it.”

He chuckled. “If you fall off the cliff, you’ve gone too far.”

Eliza smiled slightly. “Thank you,” she said quietly before turning to head off along the ledge that circled the eastern part of the city.

A few minutes later, Eliza found the market. Rather, she assumed it must be a market. There wasn’t exactly a sign, but the massive throng of people milling between brightly-colored booths was a dead giveaway. Uncertain what to do, she drifted between the stalls, inspecting the various goods people were selling as merchants shouted

out information regarding their wares.

Her brow wrinkled in concentration as she stopped in front of one booth. This merchant was selling various weapons, the equipment laid out on wooden tables and racks. As Eliza took note of one particular item, status information was displayed alongside the weapon.

> **Common Longsword**
> An ordinary but effective weapon and a staple among adventurers. You notice some rust along the blade and nicks in the steel that indicate it has not been properly repaired or maintained. There may be a risk that the blade will crack or chip during battle.
> **Quality:** D
> **Damage:** 9-19 (Slash)
> **Durability:** 12/20

"Looking for a sword, girl?" a brawny merchant asked from behind the counter. "We have the best quality goods on the Silver Coast." He tapped his finger along the steel. "See the polish on this one?"

"I'm okay," Eliza said quietly, moving further down the booths. She was thinking about the prompt she had seen. She wasn't the sort of person that knew much about swords, so how had she noticed the imperfections in the blade? She could only surmise that it must have something to do with her *Identification* skill.

Another few booths down, she came to a complete stop, her eyes widening in surprise. She approached this new stand slowly. The stall was filled with heaping crates and tables piled with dried herbs and plants she had never seen before.

On one table, she noticed a potted plant with serpent-like tendrils and vines – some of which actually had serpent heads attached. She also saw an assortment of multi-colored fungi that she had never seen before. As she approached the plants, a vine lashed out at her. Before it touched her skin, an older woman whacked the tendril away with a stick.

"You should be careful," the woman said, scowling at the offending plant. "Some of the specimens here, especially the live ones, are a little aggressive."

"What's that plant?" Eliza asked, eyeing the shrub in shock.

"That's Lash Root. Good for making Stamina Potions. It's just a bit difficult to harvest if you know what I mean."

"And this one here?" Eliza asked, pointing at a mushroom with a white stem and a bright red bulb. She could see faint yellow dots

across the crown of the mushroom.

"That's Hog Stool. I know it's not the most pleasant name, but, ironically, it's quite useful for making Clarity Potions." She tapped her forehead as she took a seat on a nearby stool. "It gives the user a bit of a boost to their brain power."

Eliza observed the fungi carefully, and a notice appeared in the air beside it.

> **Hog Stool**
> This odd-looking mushroom has a number of useful applications. You are currently only aware of one use involving the creation of Clarity Potions.
> **Quality:** C
> **Side Effects:** Mild-to-moderate hallucinations. Other effects unknown.

Eliza pushed her glasses further back on her nose as she read the notification. It was strange that she was able to detect possible side effects of the plant, but she assumed it must be another aspect of her *Identification* skill. It seemed that the skill was going to be quite useful afterall.

"Are you interested in herbalism?" the woman asked, noting the way that Eliza had been eyeing her plants and herbs carefully.

"I'm not certain what you mean, but I enjoy gardening," Eliza replied in a soft voice. "I've just never seen any of these plants before. They're… interesting."

The old woman seemed to consider something for a moment before sticking out her hand toward Eliza. "My name's Alma," she said as Eliza tentatively took her hand. "I have a small garden and alchemy lab outside of town, and I just so happen to be looking for a new apprentice."

Alma glanced aside for a moment, and Eliza could have sworn the older woman grumbled something about poisons and comas. "Anyway, you seem like you might have an interest in the trade. What do you say, girl? Would you like to come work for me? It doesn't pay well, but I could teach you a thing or two."

Eliza's eyes widened. For some reason, the offer deeply appealed to her. It was definitely a better option than learning how to swing a sword, anyway. She nodded her head. "I would love to," she replied.

"Good. Good," Alma said, waving a hand absently before glancing up at the sun. Eliza noticed that it was starting to drift toward the horizon. "We're almost done for the day, so why don't you

help me pack up and lug this stuff back to my house."

As Eliza moved to help the older woman, a blue notice appeared in front of her.

New Quest: Green Thumb

Alma has offered to teach you Alchemy and Herbalism in exchange for help around her lab and garden. This will give you an opportunity to learn more about these professions.

Difficulty: F
Success: Continue working for Alma.
Failure: Quit.
Reward: Training in Alchemy and Herbalism. Other rewards unknown.

This hadn't been what Eliza was expecting when she logged into Awaken Online, but somehow it felt fitting. If she were being honest with herself, she was actually a little excited to learn more from Alma. It was the first time she had felt that sensation in a long time.

Chapter 4 - Constructive

"This one here is called Rose Thistle," Alma explained as she pointed to a plant that looked remarkably like rosemary. It was a bushy plant that rose to Eliza's waist, and thick gray needles covered its limbs.

The pair was kneeling in Alma's garden. Her house was located just outside of Falcon's Hook along the edge of a nearby forest. "House" might not have been precisely the right word, however. Alma owned a small isolated compound of cottages ringed by towering oaks. She used one of the buildings as her home. The other two were for storing and drying various plants and brewing potions. Between these structures was nearly an acre that Alma had turned into a gardener's paradise. A tall stone wall circled a garden that contained all manner of exotic plants and herbs.

"How do you harvest this one?" Eliza asked curiously, pointing at the Rose Thistle.

Alma used a pair of shears to cut off a branch. "You can just remove individual limbs and then strip the needles, but I suggest we wait until we get inside to remove the needles. They make a good catalyst for other potions – increasing their strength. You don't want to lose any during the harvesting process."

Eliza tried this on her own, collecting multiple limbs and carefully placing them in a nearby basket. After a few minutes, she was rewarded with a notification.

x1 Level Up!
You have (10) undistributed stat points.

x1 Skill Rank Up: Herbalism
Skill Level: Beginner Level 2
Effect: Allows the player to harvest more difficult or dangerous plants. 1% chance for double ingredients.

She wiped at her forehead with her sleeve as she looked at the notifications. It had been a surprise that she could earn experience gardening. In fact, she was already a lofty level 3. She expected that wasn't much progress compared to other players, but she was still proud of how she was improving.

“That looks like enough,” Alma said, noticing that Eliza had filled her basket. “Next, we can take these herbs inside and prepare them.” The older woman rose with a soft groan and headed to her lab.

Eliza followed, and the pair soon stepped inside the small cottage, where an assortment of surprisingly modern-looking laboratory equipment lay across multiple tables. Alma had squeezed furniture into the tiny space and had hung racks along the walls, which held all manner of instruments and vials.

“The process for distilling most herbs is relatively simple,” Alma explained, indicating that Eliza should place the basket beside her. She pulled a limb from the basket and stripped the needles with a small knife, the pile landing in a bowl she had set on the counter.

“However, you do need to be careful you don’t include other remnants of the plant,” the older woman explained, plucking a stem from the bowl that she had accidentally sliced off. She held up the sliver for Eliza. “Some parts can be quite poisonous. For example, the stem of the Rose Thistle can cause minor paralysis. It’s not fatal, mind you, but our customers would definitely not be happy if they suddenly had trouble moving.”

Eliza’s eyes widened in alarm, as Alma continued, “In more benign cases, the extra material can dilute or weaken the mixture, resulting in less potent potions.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Eliza replied, observing her carefully. “What’s the next step?”

Alma nodded and grabbed another vial from the shelf, placing it over a burner. “We’ll distill the oil from the needles. It should turn a dark gray once it’s completed. Then we can add this oil to other potions to increase their potency.

“This is really the role of a catalyst. They increase the strength of other potions and sometimes allow you to combine two or more ingredients that otherwise wouldn’t mix well. The interactions between ingredients are almost a separate field of study altogether.”

Eliza watched the process in fascination as Alma sped through the various steps with practiced hands. The woman was a font of knowledge when it came to *Herbalism* and *Alchemy*. Somehow, she was able to recall every detail regarding the plants in her garden and the combinations of various ingredients.

As Alma set the solution over the burner, Eliza’s gaze wandered to the books on the shelves around the lab. The older woman had assigned her quite a bit of reading over the last day. In contrast to her real-life studies, however, she found this fascinating. The game’s programmers had developed an entirely new chemistry system centered around the in-game plants. She was a little in awe of how much work that must have taken.

“And here we go,” Alma said, lifting a vial of a dark gray substance. “Not too hard, huh?”

“I think I could probably handle this,” Eliza said confidently.

“Well then, by all means, give it a try,” the older woman replied with a chuckle. “I’ll go out and finish tending to the garden.”

Eliza spent the next hour stripping needles, preparing the distillation solution, and harvesting vials of the dark gray substance. She found herself swiftly getting into the rhythm and routine of the process and losing track of time. After she had made her way through the entire basket, another series of notifications appeared in her vision.

x1 Level Up!
You have (15) undistributed stat points.

x1 Skill Rank Up: Alchemy
Skill Level: Beginner Level 2
Effect: Increases the success chance of crafting potions and potion potency by 2%.

“Not too bad,” Alma said from behind Eliza as she surveyed the new potions.

“Thank you,” Eliza said with a small smile. She was actually enjoying herself for the first time in a long while. It was a shame she would need to log off soon to work on her classwork. Apparently, her “break” only applied to her extra coursework, not her regular classes.

Alma watched her closely. “You have done well over the last day or two. I think perhaps you might be ready to claim a class for yourself.”

“What do you mean?” Eliza asked in confusion. “Haven’t I already learned the *Herbalism* and *Alchemy* skills?”

“Of course. Of course. But those are just *skills*. You also need to select a class for yourself. If you pull up your Character Status screen, your class should show up as a blank right now.”

Eliza’s brow furrowed, and she fiddled with the menus on her in-game user interface. She had noticed the odd little bars indicating her health, mana, and stamina hovering at the corner of her vision, but she hadn’t spent much time digging through the menus. After an embarrassing moment, she eventually found the button that brought up her Character Status screen. She tapped it, and a large blue window appeared in the air before her.

Character Status			
Name:	Eliza	**Gender:**	Female
Level:	4	**Class:**	
Race:	Human	**Alignment:**	True-Neutral
Fame:	0	**Infamy:**	0
Health:	110	**H-Regen:**	0.30/Sec
Mana:	185	**M-Regen:**	2.00/Sec
Stamina	110	**S-Regen:**	1.00/Sec
Str:	10	**Dex:**	10
Vit:	10	**End:**	10
Int:	15	**Will:**	15

"Good. Now see how your class is currently blank? You can select one by going to see the trainers in Falcon's Hook."

"Okay… but what type of class should I pick?" Eliza asked with concern. If her real-life experience and the Hippie's garden had taught her anything, it was that she wasn't great at making decisions.

"If you want your focus to be on Alchemy and Herbalism, then there are several classes that provide a good synergy. If you want to focus on making money, a Merchant class would be useful. A more combat-oriented class might also be helpful if you plan to try to find rare plants and ingredients – I can't grow everything in my garden, and we don't always use plants in our potions."

Eliza pushed at her glasses as she considered these options. She was going to rule out the combat class immediately, and she was a bit skeptical that she would make a good merchant. "What class are you?" she finally asked.

"I chose to become a water mage," Alma said, placing her hand on her chest. "Most of the spells are useful for growing herbs and plants, and I don't have much desire to go out adventuring."

The older woman paused and looked at Eliza closely. “The trouble with choosing a magic class is that you have to have the right affinity. You will also have to convince the mage guild in Falcon’s Hook to teach you Veridian – the language of mages. They tend to be a finicky bunch and put their apprentices through all sorts of hoops.”

Eliza grimaced at this news. She liked working with Alma and didn’t enjoy the idea of having to do quests for a bunch of mages to earn their approval.

“I suggest you take a walk into town and talk to a few of the class trainers. The fresh air would do you good anyway. You’ve been cooped up here for the last couple days.”

“Okay,” Eliza said reluctantly and headed for the door.

“One more thing,” Alma called from behind her, stepping forward slowly and leaning on her cane. “Some of the guilds in town get a stipend based on how many travelers they sign up, so they can be somewhat pushy. You don’t have to pick anything today. Don’t let anyone pressure you into something you don’t want to do.”

Eliza nodded numbly, thinking to herself that Alma may have just described the sum total of her life outside the game. She spent most of her time catering to her parents’ demands. Perhaps the older woman was right. If this was just a game, maybe she should focus on picking something she would enjoy. That was the whole point of playing after all. This was supposed to be her time to decompress and get lost in something other than her studies.

She exited the cottage and made her way toward Falcon’s Hook. Alma’s cottage was located on the outskirts of the forest and a few miles from town. As Eliza ventured toward Falcon’s Hook – following a roughhewn dirt road – the tree cover began to thin. She was nearly halfway to the main highway into the city when she heard a person speaking loudly around the next bend.

“I’m telling you, she is supposed to come this way,” a young man’s voice echoed through the wood. “This is the only road between here and the town.”

“Ahh, there she is!” the Hippie exclaimed as she rounded the corner. He was sitting on a log beside the trail, with Fluffy lying amiably beside him.

“See, I told you she would take this path.” Looking up at Eliza, he gestured to Fluffy. “He is always such a pessimist.” This earned him a soft snort, and Eliza could have sworn the sheep rolled its eyes.

“What do you want?” Eliza demanded in an irritated voice. She was still upset at how the Hippie had tossed her into Falcon’s Hook with no warning or explanation.

“I heard you were looking for a class,” he said innocently. “And I figured I would offer my advice!”

“How could you know that?” she asked, puzzled.

“It’s a mystery,” he replied, steepling his fingers in what she assumed was some poor attempt to look calculating or mysterious. “Suffice it to say that I have my ways.”

Eliza shook her head. “I haven’t even spoken to the trainers. I don’t know what class I want to choose yet,” she explained, trying to edge around the crazy young man.

“No need! I have the perfect solution for you. Drum roll please, Fluffy,” he demanded. The sheep proceeded to thump its tail lazily against the ground.

“You should be… wait for it…”

“A water mage!” the Hippie announced enthusiastically.

Eliza just stared at him for a moment, adjusting her glasses. “That’s the same class as Alma, but she said I’ll probably have to convince the mage guild to train me.”

The Hippie seemed a bit deflated by this news. “Huh. Well, that’s a bit of a letdown. Oh, I know! We can teach you!”

“You can teach me?” Eliza echoed, eyeing him skeptically.

“*We*,” he clarified, gesturing at his pet sheep.

“Okay…” Eliza said slowly, trying to figure out how to extricate herself from this conversation so she could head into town.

“Great! Then it’s decided,” the young man clapped his hands together and then his fingers began to wiggle through an odd serious of gestures.

“What’re you doing?” Eliza asked as she watched him.

Her question was answered a moment later as droplets of water rose from the plants around her. The water swirled and danced in the air, forming multiple liquid globes that orbited the Hippie slowly. Once nearly a dozen of the spheres had collected around him, the young man glanced at Eliza, and a grin curled his lips.

He pointed in her direction, and the orbs raced toward her. Eliza ducked the first globe, but the next two splashed against her chest. Instead of merely soaking her clothes, the water formed a thick coating on her woolen shirt and began to expand unnaturally. Distracted by the strange liquid, Eliza lost focus, and another orb slammed into her shoulder while a third hit her in the back of the head.

“What is this?” Eliza asked, panic creeping into her voice as the water began to coat most of her upper body and crawl up her neck.

“Think of this as a crash course. We don’t have time to tackle the long version. Things to do, people to see. I’m sure you understand,” the Hippie said glibly, sitting back down on his log and watching her with a curious expression. Fluffy also spared a bored glance in her direction before going back to sleep.

“It’s easier if you just try and accept it,” the young man advised her as the water crept across her face, and tendrils began to cover her nose.

As the water fully enveloped her face, Eliza tried to hold her breath – her eyes wide as she clawed at the liquid. *This is just a game*, she kept reminding herself. She didn’t really need to breathe. And yet, the burning sensation in her lungs didn’t seem to know that.

“Don’t try to fight it,” the Hippie said impatiently. “You’re just making this take longer.”

Eliza had some choice words for him in response, but she didn’t have the breath to speak. Finally, she couldn’t help but try to breathe, and she reflexively opened her mouth. The water immediately flooded her lungs and nose. She gasped and choked as the world began to grow black and stars drifted at the edge of her vision. At the same time, a strange tickling sensation tingled the back of her head, building swiftly in intensity. The odd feeling soon flooded her mind and grew into a throbbing pain. She collapsed to her knees choking and her hands clutching at her head.

Then, mercifully, darkness claimed her.

Eliza woke some time later, her eyes blurry and unfocused. “What happened?” she croaked, trying to sit up.

“You passed out,” the Hippie said in a bored voice. “You literally held your breath until you passed out. I told you not to fight it.”

The memory came back quickly, and Eliza glared at him. “You tried to drown me!”

“That wasn’t ordinary water. It was just a tool to teach you Veridian. You would have been fine if you had just tried to breathe normally.”

Eliza stared at him for a moment as she adjusted her glasses. “You… you could have said that.”

“I believe I did,” he said with a confused look on his face, before turning to the sheep. “Didn’t I, Fluffy?” Then he shrugged, his multi-colored shirt flapping gently. “Oh well. In any event, you are now a full-fledged water mage! I also taught you the language of mages.”

He waited a few seconds with an expectant look on his face. “No rush. You can thank me when you’re ready… Any time now…”

Instead, Eliza muttered a few choice curse words under her breath, purposefully ignoring the irritating young man. As she managed to regain her feet, a barrage of notifications appeared before her.

Class Change: Water Mage

You have been given a class by the Great Black Sheep. You really should be honored. In fact, it would behoove you to thank your benefactor. He has been known to accept thanks in the form of head rubs…

+20 Willpower
+15 Intelligence
Increased Water Magic Affinity (Currently 21%)

System Notice: Affinity System Unlocked

Please see your Character Status for more information.

New Passive Skill: Mana Mastery
Your body contains natural mana, and you have a high affinity for magic. However, both of these are useless without the requisite tools to channel and cast your mana. You have learned the language of the original mages, Veridian. You may now manipulate your mana.
Skill Level: Beginner Level 1
Effect: -1% to the mana cost of spells.

"See? Wasn't that easier than having to do a bunch of trivial tasks for those mages?" the Hippie asked. "Plus, we saved you a trip into town!"

Eliza didn't bother to respond. Instead, she turned and started walking back to Alma's house. If she had it her way, she might never leave the garden again – which was probably a good thing. She didn't consider herself a violent person, but she wasn't certain she would be able to resist the urge to strangle the Hippie if she saw him again.

As she walked away, she heard the young man call out behind her, "Hey, wait! You forgot Fluffy's head rub!"

Eliza didn't turn around.

Chapter 5 - Tedious

Eliza's fingers dug into the loose soil and wrapped around the base of the plant. She pulled hard, ripping the weed out of the ground before tossing the offending plant onto the swiftly growing pile beside her. She paused for a moment, rubbing at the sweat that had formed on her forehead as she surveyed the garden.

"You're doing well, girl," Alma called from behind her.

Eliza turned and caught sight of the older woman standing in the doorway to her laboratory. She wore thick woolen clothing stained with splotches of green and red – evidence that she had been hard at work creating another batch of potions. The woman leaned heavily on her crooked wooden cane as her eyes scanned the garden appreciatively.

"Thank you, Alma," Eliza replied with a small, embarrassed smile. "It's the least I could do for you since you took me under your wing."

"Nonsense," the woman replied with a wave of her hand. "You're a fast learner. Few of my other apprentices have picked up the trade as easily as you. Speaking of which, why don't you pick some Dragon's Breath and come help me inside. I promised to brew a batch of healing potions for Clarence's men. It seems they are unusually prone to injuring themselves."

Eliza nodded agreeably. Clarence ran the local lumber mill outside of Falcon's Hook. Unfortunately, injuries weren't uncommon in that profession. "Just give me a moment, and I'll meet you inside," Eliza replied.

Several more days had passed in-game, and Eliza had spent that time working in Alma's garden and her laboratory. She had been relentless in her pursuit of more knowledge, memorizing the plants in Alma's books and insisting that the older women teach her as many potions as possible. In contrast to her regular school work, she loved her new fantasy garden.

Eliza gingerly stepped around a Thicker Thump plant, maintaining a distance of at least two feet. She knew if she got too close to the bush, it would shoot small thorns in her direction – which would be covered in an irritant that would give her an itchy rash. She had learned the hard way that there were some aspects of AO that were perhaps a bit too realistic.

She had also discovered that many of the garden's plants were rather violent – or extremely poisonous – so navigating the garden

needed to be done with care. After a moment's trek through the various rows of plants, she found her target – a dark green plant with large, vibrant red bulbs. Dragon's Breath was an intimidating name, but it was actually one of the less dangerous plants she had encountered.

She carefully plucked two of the red bulbs and deposited them in the pocket of her apron, quickly wiping off the crimson powder that clung to her fingers on the coarse cloth. She could already feel her fingertips begin to tingle as the numbing effect of the powder took hold. As she deposited the ingredients, a blue notification flashed in Eliza's vision.

x1 Level Up!
You have (5) undistributed stat points.

x1 Skill Rank Up: Herbalism
Skill Level: Beginner Level 6
Effect: Allows the player to harvest more difficult or dangerous plants. 3% chance for double ingredients.

Eliza surveyed the notifications carefully. She had leveled quite quickly over the last few days – although, admittedly, the time compression meant that nearly a week had already passed in-game since she had begun playing. It had been a while since she had reviewed her Character Status and so she decided to check on her progress.

Character Status			
Name:	Eliza	**Gender:**	Female
Level:	21	**Class:**	Water Mage
Race:	Human	**Alignment:**	True-Neutral
Fame:	0	**Infamy:**	0
Health:	300	**H-Regen:**	0.80/Sec
Mana:	850	**M-Regen:**	9.25/Sec
Stamina	400	**S-Regen:**	3.00/Sec
Str:	10	**Dex:**	10
Vit:	20	**End:**	30
Int:	50	**Will:**	55

Affinities			
Dark:	1%	**Light:**	1%
Fire:	1%	**Water:**	21%
Air:	2%	**Earth:**	5%

She had decided to put points in *Endurance* and *Vitality* to improve her ability to work in the garden, which made her tire slower. The remaining points went to *Intelligence* and *Willpower*, which improved her ability to cast simple spells and learn recipes. However, working in the garden didn't require much *Strength* or *Dexterity*, so she hadn't allocated any points to those stats.

Eliza started back toward the cottage, picking her way carefully through the rows of vegetation. As she neared the door, she hesitated and promptly slapped a palm to her forehead. She had nearly forgotten to water the garden.

Turning back to the rows of plants behind her, her hands

automatically began to dart through a series of practiced motions as arcane words slipped from her lips. A ball of water slowly formed in front of her, condensing into a rough sphere about the size of a basketball. As Eliza uttered the last word of the spell, the orb erupted into a thick cloud of mist, the fog drifting back over the garden and coating the plants with moisture.

Eliza smiled slightly as she watched the spell work. She had learned that *Obscuring Mist* was intended to be a defensive spell for water mages, but she had found it incredibly useful for watering Alma's garden. After her encounter with the Hippie and his faithful black-haired companion, she had realized that the irritating young man had chosen her spells for her. In addition to *Obscuring Mist*, she could also cast *Ice Bolt* and *Cold Grasp*. The first was a simple damage spell that shot a shard of ice. The second was some type of slowing spell or something. She hadn't had any occasion to use those two spells yet, and she wasn't sure how useful they would actually be in helping Alma.

Her chores accomplished, Eliza stepped into the house. In contrast to the brightly-lit garden, the cottage was dim and, it took her eyes a moment to adjust. The familiar rows of tables greeted her, and Alma had already placed the necessary equipment on one of the counters.

"You can go ahead and prep the Dragon's Breath," Alma advised, motioning to the table beside her. "I'm setting up the distiller as we speak." Her wrinkled hands worked to connect a series of tubes to a flask set over a small burner.

Eliza nodded wordlessly and deposited the red bulbs on the table. She grabbed a mortar and pestle from one of the nearby shelves and swiftly set to work grinding up the bulbs into a fine paste. They would then boil the mixture down and distill the oil.

The pair worked in sync as they made the potions. One of the things that Eliza liked about Alma was that she didn't demand constant conversation. She also didn't put any real pressure on Eliza to work – giving her free range to study her books and work in the garden as she pleased. In contrast to her real life, this felt like a vacation.

Once the waiting vial had been filled with the distilled oil, Eliza poured the substance into several glass flasks filled with purified water. She carefully stoppered the potions and shook them gently to mix the contents. Soon she had a set of bright red potions sitting on the table before her. She then placed the set of vials into a bag on the table.

"Would you like to deliver them?" Alma asked, eyeing her carefully. "It might do you some good to get out and see the city a bit.

You spend most of your time cooped up in the garden."

New Quest: Deliver the Potions

Alma has asked you to deliver a batch of health potions to Clarence – again. You know the gist, do some walking. Then maybe hand a bag to someone and walk back to the cottage.

Difficulty: F
Success: Deliver the potions.
Failure: Don't deliver the potions?
Reward: Absolutely nothing. Why are you doing this?

Eliza shook her head at the quest prompt. In the beginning, the text hadn't been nearly so sarcastic and had outlined different quest rewards. Now all she received were these passive aggressive messages implying that these simple quests were a waste of time. The tone of the prompts also sounded suspiciously like the Hippie.

"I'd be happy to help," she replied to Alma, grabbing the small bag. She removed her apron and strapped the bag to the belt at her waist. She also collected her pack containing a crude set of alchemy tools, some extra herbs, the potions she had created so far, and a few empty containers in case she stumbled upon some interesting plants on the way to Falcon's Hook.

"I'll be back in a bit."

"Be careful, girl," Alma called out behind her as she left.

Be careful of what? Eliza thought dryly. *There's nothing between here and the city.*

She started her journey by following the rough trail through the thinning woods. The Hippie hadn't made an appearance since he had tried to drown her, but she kept an eye peeled anyway. The trail soon connected to a full-fledged road where she joined other NPCs and players on their trek back to the city.

Eliza eyed the other travelers as she walked, noting their dusty clothing and bloodstained armor. They spoke animatedly – most traveling in groups of four or five people. In contrast, Eliza walked alone and kept her head down, avoiding eye contact. After a few minutes, she caught sight of the walls of the city ahead of her. The massive piled layers of stone towered into the sky, forming a ring around the multi-tiered buildings inside.

"Running yet another errand?"

Eliza whirled and discovered that the Hippie was walking beside her with Fluffy in tow. The sheep scooted over beside Eliza, bumping against her and eyeing her with a woeful expression. Taking pity on the sheep, Eliza petted his head absently, causing his eyes to roll back in bliss.

"Yes, yes I am," Eliza said shortly. "Is that a problem?"

"Not really. It's just incredibly dull is all. Do you happen to know how many times you have performed this particular quest?"

"I haven't been counting," Eliza replied. She had. It was the eighth time she had run this type of errand.

"Mmhmm," the Hippie said in an unconvincing tone. "Well, my chosen one needs to be doing more impressive feats," he continued, throwing his arms wide. "Grand sweeping battles. Maybe tame a dragon. Rescue a damsel… or…err, an eligible bachelor maybe?" He hesitated. "Although, it doesn't look good that the guy went and got himself captured in the first place. You really should save yourself for someone that can hold his own – you don't need a *project* at your age."

Eliza grimaced at the Hippie's unsolicited dating advice before glancing at the other NPCs and players that shuffled along within earshot. She was surprised that they weren't reacting to this strange conversation. "I didn't ask to be your *chosen one*," she whispered quietly.

"Of course not," the young man replied in surprise. "That isn't the way this works. You're my chosen one – not my *volunteered* one. At least, that's how I think it works." He looked a little confused for a moment. "The others told me that I was the one that did the choosing..."

"The others?" Eliza asked, pushing at her glasses with one finger and watching the Hippie with curiosity. "What others?"

"The other gods!" the Hippie replied, placing a hand on his chest. "Just like me!"

"You're a god?" Eliza inquired incredulously. "You certainly don't look like a god. Or act like one."

The young man looked a little flustered and then pointed at his sheep. "Just ask Fluffy. He knows!" The animal shook his head in what appeared to be exasperation.

"Okay, sure. You're a god. So why did you choose me?" Eliza asked, deciding to play along for the moment. Maybe she could lose him in the crowd once they got to the city.

"I explained that already! The other gods told me I had to. Especially my prudish sister. She was quite adamant about it. Something about maintaining the balance. Apparently, there was a little tiff, and a city was destroyed or something," he added with a dismissive wave of his hand. "I don't have much interest in politics,

you know."

"You mean Lux?" Eliza asked in surprise. She might be a bit anti-social, but she had seen the in-game notification when Jason conquered the city – along with the rest of the game world. The rumor was that he had apparently taken out an in-game city by himself.

The Hippie tapped his lips thoughtfully. "That might be it. Sounds familiar." He glanced at Eliza. "You need to go do some amazing things like that!"

"No," Eliza said.

"What do you mean, no?"

"I mean that I'm happy with what I'm doing. I like Alma, and I enjoy learning alchemy." She shrugged. "I don't want to conquer a city."

"Well, I don't want to either," the Hippie replied in exasperation. "But my siblings were quite insistent. We all have to do things we don't want to do," he added with a frown.

"Not me," Eliza said.

The Hippie sighed. "Oh, come on. Just one epic quest? Maybe a small one to start? We can ease you into it."

"No," Eliza replied.

"You haven't even seen it yet!"

"Don't care. I'm just going to deliver these potions and return to Alma's cottage."

"Here, at least read the prompt," the Hippie said, waving his hands in the air animatedly. Eliza looked at the people around them in alarm. Could they not see or hear the Hippie?

A blue notification abruptly appeared in her vision:

New Quest: Grand Fetch Quest

The Great Black Sheep has offered you a truly special errand – we heard you enjoy those. Fluffy…err… we mean the Great Black Sheep has lost an item of infinite importance. Retrieve this item and claim your reward!

Difficulty: A
Success: Find and retrieve the item.
Failure: Make Fluffy cry.
Reward: Something special.

"Are you kidding me?" Eliza asked.

“Not at all,” the Hippie replied, looking a little miffed. “Fluffy lost something important, and I need you to go find it.” He glanced at the sheep and then back at Eliza. “If you won’t do it for me, at least do it for his sake.”

The Hippie nudged the black sheep and Eliza could have sworn the animal sighed before turning to look at her with a baleful expression. She could see a lone tear hanging under one of its eyes as it let out a soft bleat.

“That’s low,” Eliza muttered, turning away. “But the answer is still no.” She could see that they were nearing the gates. She quickened her pace slightly, ready to be done with this conversation. Yet this didn’t help, as the Hippie easily kept pace.

“Well, I didn’t want to have to do this, but you leave me no choice.” The young man waved his arms again in a dramatic series of gestures.

And nothing happened.

“I left you no choice but to wave your arms like a crazy person?” Eliza asked, slowing and watching him in confusion.

A raindrop landed on her face, and she wiped at her cheek. She glanced up and noted that the sun still shone brightly and only a handful of clouds drifted through the sky. And yet more rain continued to fall – quickly escalating in intensity. Eliza immediately realized that the rain only fell in a straight line that ran across the road directly in front of her and extended into the distance on either side. Within seconds, a torrent was falling from the sky, creating a veritable wall of water.

“What is…?” Eliza trailed off as she watched other players and NPCs walk through the barrier with no issue. They didn’t even seem to notice it was there.

“It’s a *Water Fall Wall*,” the Hippie replied proudly, stumbling slightly as he said the words. “Try to say that three times fast!” Fluffy snorted softly beside him – whether in amusement or pain, Eliza wasn’t sure.

“Why can’t they see this?” Eliza asked the Hippie, gesturing at the other players. A few of them glanced at her with a confused expression but kept walking.

He shrugged. “I’m a god. Travelers and other residents of this world can’t see me unless I choose to let them. I could have sworn I mentioned that...”

“Fine, whatever. I’m just going to go through,” she replied, her frustration mounting. She wouldn’t be forced into playing the capricious god’s games.

Eliza plowed forward, approaching the wall of water. As she neared it, the torrent strengthened until it was pounding against the

stone and dirt of the roadway. She tried to reach out an arm to touch the wall, but the water intensified further, and she was pushed back. Apparently, the wall was intended to prevent only her from entering the city.

She glanced back at the Hippie. “This isn’t fair,” she muttered. She noticed a few players and NPCs eyeing her askance as they walked through the water wall.

“Life’s not fair,” the god said with another shrug. “May as well accept it.”

Then a smile crossed his face. “Now about my quest…”

Chapter 6 - Impossible

Eliza trudged down the road, muttering to herself under her breath. She wasn't certain who would design a game where the gods could pigeonhole a player into following one path. She had considered simply returning to Alma's house. However, the Hippie had promised he would let her re-enter the city if she completed his task. In the long run, she needed access to the city to buy supplies and run errands, so she had decided to play along.

For now.

At least, the god had been "kind" enough to mark the quest location on her map. Apparently, she was supposed to head a few miles west of Falcon's Hook. As she walked, the tree cover began to thicken, only the occasional beam of sunlight managing to penetrate the blanket of leaves that hung overhead.

The number of players and NPCs had begun to thin out. A few hours ago, one player had stopped her, eyeing her equipment skeptically. He had warned her that the creatures in the deeper parts of the forest were much more difficult. She had grumbled something incoherent about black sheep and homeless gods and, ignoring his warnings, she had kept walking.

It wasn't like she would fare well against even the lower-level creatures in-game. She hadn't been in combat at all, even after a week spent inside of AO. Eliza had the two offensive spells the Hippie had given her when she received her class change, but she hadn't had much need to use them in the garden.

Eliza glanced at her in-game clock. She would need to log out soon to fix dinner for her parents. However, her map indicated that she was getting close to the quest location. She might as well see what she was up against first. As she rounded a bend in the road, she saw a massive bridge ahead of her.

Nearing the bridge, Eliza realized that the structure overhung a gorge. The chasm dropped nearly a hundred feet, and a river ran along the ravine far below. Likely, the water had cut a path through the stone over time on its way to the coast to the east. She pushed at her glasses as she observed the gorge. She could see a narrow trail that wound its way down the ledge to her right, but she wasn't anxious to attempt the path.

The bridge was a considerable structure, spanning a few dozen yards. It appeared to have been built of a mixture of roughhewn rock and wood. Massive columns of stone lanced down from the bottom of

the bridge, embedding themselves in the gorge far below. At first glance, Eliza wasn't certain that the bridge had been built by mundane means. The stones almost appeared to blend together – possibly indicating that magic had been used to construct it.

She pulled up her map to see if she was getting close to her destination. She discovered that the quest marker illuminated the whole area nearby – which wasn't exactly helpful. Not that she was surprised, of course. With a sigh, she decided to continue past the bridge.

When she was nearly halfway across, she felt the entire structure shake. Eliza froze. She could hear the sound of pounding coming from the side of the bridge, each thump causing the structure to shudder dangerously. The reverberations were becoming louder, as though something was climbing the bridge.

Edging away from the noise, her back soon pressed against the railing on the far side of the structure. She wasn't sure whether to run or not, her eyes darting to either end of the gorge. Should she head back the way she came?

The decision was made for her a moment later as a grotesque head appeared over the lip of the railing on the other side of the bridge, swiftly followed by the creature's enormous body. The monster had four arms and two legs and was covered in a rough leathery hide. Its skin almost appeared to be made of stone the way the creature's limbs were cobbled together at hard angles.

The monster's glowing green eyes drifted across the bridge before settling on Eliza's cowering form. A growl rumbled in its chest. "Another traveler…" it said, its voice hoarse. It formed the words awkwardly as though unaccustomed to speaking.

It didn't seem that the creature planned to attack her immediately and so Eliza tried to tamp down on her fear. She knew this wasn't real, but that didn't change the fact that she was being confronted by an eight-foot-tall monster. She decided to use her *Identification* skill.

Mountain Troll – Level 76 (Boss)
Health – Unknown
Mana – Unknown
Equipment – Unknown
Resistances – Unknown

Holy crap… she thought. *Level 76? And it's some kind of boss creature?*

Eliza had realized early on that the *Identification* skill she had

picked up in the Hippie's garden was extremely useful. First, it wasn't limited to objects. Second, while she didn't always learn all of the details about the object she identified, she seemed to gain more information than most players. It had come in handy when working in Alma's garden, which she was sorely missing right now.

"W-what do you want?" Eliza managed to stutter.

"Toll," the troll growled at her, lifting its arms with its four palms facing upward.

Eliza's eyes widened. "I don't have any money," she said. Which was true. She had never asked Alma for money, and she had immediately spent any coin the woman gave her on Alchemy tools and books.

"Toll," the troll demanded more forcefully, standing up straighter and taking a ponderous step forward.

Desperate, Eliza dug into her bag in search of something to hand the troll. All she had were various plants and ingredients and a motley assortment of novice potions. Deciding she had nothing to lose, she grabbed one of her better healing potions and lifted it toward the troll.

"Will this work?" she asked, her voice quavering.

The troll plucked the small vial from her hand, lifting it up to his eye to examine its contents. "Not shiny," it growled, turning his glowing green eyes back to Eliza. "No toll, then die." The troll began to step toward the girl.

Eliza backpedaled, uncertain what to do. Her mind wheeled in panic. As the troll began to approach, she turned and tried to run. Her feet slapped frantically against the stone bridge as she raced toward the edge of the gorge. She could feel the pounding behind her intensify. Then her legs toppled out from under her.

She slammed into the bridge hard, the wind quickly evacuating her lungs. She tried to roll over, but a crushing weight descended upon her before she had a chance to react. Pain lanced through her body before the world abruptly went dark.

A prompt appeared in Eliza's vision.

System Message

You have died.

Thanks for playing Awaken Online!

A moment later, Eliza was once again standing on the bridge. She was disoriented by the sudden change in perspective, and it took her a moment to get her bearings. As she looked around, she noticed that the world had taken on a washed-out appearance and blue motes of energy hung in the air around her.

She saw her small form huddled against the railing of the bridge and she gasped. What was this? The troll again lumbered over the edge, its ugly visage leering at her evilly. The recent exchange played out again, this time with Eliza watching her panicked fearful reaction to the situation and her half-assed attempt to run away. She glanced away as she saw the troll smash her fragile body, her blood staining the stone of the bridge.

"This is impossible," she muttered. "How am I supposed to defeat a troll?"

"Troll?" a familiar voice asked from beside her. She glanced over to see the Hippie leaning casually against the edge of the bridge, Fluffy lying peacefully at his feet. As the troll's head reappeared over the ledge for the third time, the young man's eyes widened.

"Oh, I totally forgot about the troll," he said.

"You forgot?" Eliza asked with a deadpan expression.

"Yep, completely slipped my mind," the Hippie replied in a chagrined tone. "But I remember the story now. He stole the item of immense power." He added this last part with a little flourish. "But it's okay. I'm sure you can handle this just fine."

"How can I handle this? That creature is nearly four times my level, and it killed me in one hit. Besides, I don't even know what I'm supposed to be looking for to complete your dumb quest."

The Hippie looked offended and put his hands over Fluffy's ears. "Shh. This quest was Fluffy's idea. You'll upset him."

Then the young man cocked his head and glanced at the troll as he demanded a toll from Eliza. "Although now that I think about it, the whole troll toll thing is a little cliché." He glanced down at Fluffy before continuing in a whisper, "But we don't need to tell him that."

Eliza closed her eyes and forced herself to take a deep breath.

"As soon as I respawn, I'm going back to Alma's house," she finally said. "I don't care if you've blocked my access to Falcon's Hook. I can just spend more time in her garden."

"But what about the quest?" the Hippie exclaimed. "Remember? We need to recover the item of vital importance."

"I don't care," Eliza said. "I'm going back."

The Hippie looked sad. "I was hoping you wouldn't say that. I'll just have to use more of my mojo to motivate you I suppose."

"What are you talking about…?" Eliza began, but then stopped as she watched the Hippie go through another odd series of arm

waving. “Wait… don’t…”

But it was already too late. The world abruptly went dark. When she came to, Eliza found that she had respawned and was standing at the entrance to the bridge. The Hippie and Fluffy were nowhere to be found.

“Damn, stupid god,” Eliza muttered. She had no idea what spell he had cast this time, but she didn’t plan to stick around and find out. She promptly turned and started back down the road toward Falcon’s Hook.

After a few minutes of walking, Eliza turned a bend in the road and stopped abruptly. A few yards ahead of her was the familiar stone bridge. She adjusted her glasses and pondered for a moment whether she had accidentally looped around somehow. Maybe she had taken a wrong turn.

Shaking her head, she turned around and walked back down the trail. Another few minutes passed, and she again found herself in front of the bridge. One time was an accident, two times meant that a meddling, idiot god was involved. Eliza could feel her frustration mounting.

“I’m not going to do your stupid quest,” she shouted, her voice echoing down through the chasm. “You can take your item and shove it up your…” Eliza was interrupted by a cough from behind her, and she whirled, finding a group of players looking at her with confused expressions. A skinny mage leaned over and whispered to his friend while eyeing her suspiciously.

“It-it’s not what it looks like,” Eliza muttered, her eyes downcast.

The players didn’t bother to answer, edging past her and starting across the bridge. She briefly considered warning them about the troll, but what was the point? They would probably just ignore her. Not that she could blame them. She probably wouldn’t take any advice from a crazy girl screaming at a bridge.

Eliza headed to the side of the road and sat down on a log, pondering what she was going to do next. She liked playing AO. It was relaxing as long as the Hippie wasn’t meddling. But if she wanted to return to Alma’s garden, she was going to have to find a way to retrieve the item the troll stole.

As the players’ screams rang through the crevasse beside her, she tapped her fingers to her lips in thought. She was going to need a plan.

Chapter 7 - Infectious

Eliza sat by a makeshift campfire she had built in a clearing a few yards away from the Troll Bridge. She had discovered during the last few in-game days that the troll wouldn't attack her if she didn't actually step onto the bridge itself. This seemed a bit strange, but Eliza assumed the creature must be intensely territorial.

Despite its appearance, the troll was quite fast. There was enough traffic on the road that she was able to watch multiple groups pass the bridge each day. By her estimates, the troll had killed over half of them and had laid waste to whole groups of players by itself. Stealth didn't seem like it would work and there was no reasoning with the idiotic creature. The only players that had survived were those smart enough to hand over their gold or abandon their friends, using them as decoys as they ran away.

Eliza was currently grinding the seeds of a Caracas Leaf into a fine powder. Several small vials were scattered on the ground around her filled with various colored powders – the product of her work over the last few days.

Alma had always focused on healing herbs and combinations in the potions she brewed. Most people only wanted to heal their wounds or ailments. However, just like in the real world, a large number of the in-game plants were quite poisonous, and, in some cases, certain parts of the plant had potential healing properties while others were fatal. As a result, Eliza had learned to identify a number of poisonous plants as part of studying under the older woman.

She had spent the last few days preparing and experimenting. She had scoured the nearby woods for plant life, her *Herbalism* and *Identification* skills making it easier to pick out useful plants and fungi in the forest. She had then ground up the substances and boiled down those plants into a fine powder. Her goal was to make an extremely potent poison.

Because she had decided she was going to try to kill the troll by surreptitious means. It was the only chance she had against him without any sort of fighting skills.

"It has been *days*," a voice moaned from the other side of the fire. "Are you done yet?"

Eliza sighed and willed herself to be patient. If it wasn't already challenging enough to invent an in-game poison, she had been forced to put up with the Hippie's whining the entire time.

"I thought gods were supposed to be aloof and answer prayers

or something," Eliza replied. "Don't you have anything else you could be doing?"

"Not really," he replied, waving his hand lazily in the air. "I delegate all of that stuff."

Fluffy edged over to Eliza and sniffed at one of the powders. She slapped him gently on the snout, and he jumped back, glaring at her.

"It will kill you," she explained simply. "Or at least it would kill a normal sheep." This earned her a soft snort, and the sheep moved back over to the Hippie.

She eyed the finely-ground powder in the mortar and the other vials around her. She was finally ready to make her poison. She reached out and grabbed the pan that was resting over the fire and carefully poured some of the boiling water into one of her vials.

Then she began adding the powders to the vial one at a time. She didn't really have an easy way to experiment with making the poison – or any way to test it – and she wasn't certain what the troll might be resistant to. So, she was basically throwing the farm at him – or at least every poisonous plant in the nearby forest.

As she finished pouring in the last powder, Eliza stoppered the bottle and then shook it gently. As the ingredients mixed, the vial began to glow a vibrant green, and she used her *Identification* ability on it.

Unidentified Poison
This concoction was created by a novice alchemist using crude instruments. While it certainly looks poisonous, its potency and effects are unknown.
Quality: B
Damage: Unknown
Durability: 1/1

Eliza stared at the vial in her hand in shock. She had never seen a "B" quality potion before and her novice potions were typically C-quality or lower. It was a little startling, although she supposed that it was worth it after spending days gathering and preparing ingredients.

As she finished, Eliza received another set of notifications.

x2 Level Up!
You have (15) undistributed stat points.

New Passive Skill: Poisons
You have adapted your knowledge of Alchemy and Herbalism to

craft your first poison. Masters of the craft can create lethal toxins that are nearly undetectable and kill within seconds. You aren't quite there yet.
Skill Level: Beginner Level 1
Effect: 1% chance to add a second random poison effect.

x2 Skill Rank Up: Herbalism
Skill Level: Beginner Level 8
Effect: Allows the player to harvest more difficult or dangerous plants. 4% chance for double ingredients.

x1 Skill Rank Up: Alchemy
Skill Level: Beginner Level 9
Effect: Increases success chance of crafting potions and potion potency by 9%.

A couple levels and a new skill. Not too shabby.

Eliza was starting to feel a bit more confident that she could pull this off. She placed the vials carefully in her pack and put away her remaining equipment. Glancing up, she noted that she still had a few more hours until sunset. She might be able to make an attempt at the troll before the end of the day.

"Okay," she said aloud. "It's show time."

When she didn't receive a response, Eliza glanced over at the Hippie and saw that he was sound asleep. This time, Fluffy was using the young man as a pillow, resting his head on the god's stomach.

"Really?" Eliza muttered. Although she supposed it was for the best. The god's constant nattering would probably just distract her.

With another sigh, she started toward the bridge. No players or NPCs were within sight, and she knew that the troll typically retreated back down into the gorge after each encounter. She guessed that he had a cave or lair down there somewhere.

That meant she needed to traverse the narrow trail leading down into the chasm. She picked her way forward carefully, one hand always resting against the stony cliff face to provide balance. Some portions of the trail narrowed to the point where she couldn't place both her feet side-by-side. Luckily, she made it to the bottom of the gorge with only a few close calls.

Stage 1 complete, she thought as her feet touched down on solid earth. She glanced behind her, wondering how she was going to make it back up. She considered sourly that her inevitable respawn would probably expedite that process.

Now she needed to find the troll's lair. A fast-flowing river rushed through the bottom of the gorge, leaving little room on either side. Eliza had watched the troll carefully after it defeated the players. It tended to gather the loot, climb down the columns supporting the bridge and then move northwest along the river.

She made her way forward carefully, clutching her pack against her side. With the sun setting, the gorge was cast in dark shadows, making it difficult to pick out her footing. At the next step, the ground crumbled underneath her and she listed to the side. She barely managed to catch herself before she fell, her hand grasping frantically at vines that grew along the cliff face. She managed to stabilize herself. Barely.

Taking a moment to catch her breath, Eliza continued forward.

A few minutes later, she discovered a large cave carved into the side of the ridge. Bones littered the ground around the entrance, many of which looked distinctly humanoid. Eliza started labeling the bones before she could stop herself. *Humerus. Tibia. That looks like a clavicle.*

She shook her head. She should be concentrating right now. Eyeing the cave entrance, she took a deep breath to steel herself and stepped toward the entrance and peered inside. The opening was shrouded in shadow, and she could barely make out the interior.

A rumbling snort reverberated through the cave, and Eliza froze. As her eyes began to adjust to the darkness, she could make out a shadowy form. It shifted slightly and then something that sounded remarkably like a snore echoed off the stone walls of the cavern.

As Eliza stood watching the sleeping troll, a question occurred to her.

How was she going to administer the poison?

She honestly hadn't thought that far ahead. It wasn't like she could pour the vial into the creature's mouth – since she expected it would take some time for the poison to take effect. She looked around the cave frantically, trying to find something to use. Maybe it kept some food in the cave? Her eyes swept over the bones – noticing for the first time how clean they looked. It appeared that the troll had already eaten.

Despair crept into her mind, and she began to realize that days of work were going to amount to nothing. She would still be stuck by this stupid bridge. Even worse, she would have to continue to put up with the Hippie's constant complaining.

She closed her eyes for a moment, trying to calm her mind. She just needed to think this through. How did people administer poisons? Honestly, who knew? Believe it or not, assassination techniques hadn't been part of her regular curriculum. But that thought made her pause. She had actually studied a few organisms that effectively poisoned

their hosts. For example, viruses weren't poisonous per se, but she knew that they had many vectors for transmission. Touch, bodily fluids, vapor…

Now that was an idea. She had her *Obscuring Mist* spell. Maybe she could somehow combine the poison with the spell. But how? She visualized the steps of the spell. First, it gathered moisture to her, forming a globe of water. As she finished casting, the orb exploded into a mist. Maybe she could apply the poison to the orb before she finished casting?

Yet that only created another problem. She needed her hands free to keep casting. How would she administer the poison? Perhaps she could pause casting the spell by not completing the incantation?

Damn it. I wish I had tested this before coming down here.

She would probably only get one chance to test her theory before the troll killed her. Then she would have to wait for her respawn, walk all the way back, and hope that the troll was still asleep. That was also putting aside the fact that she only had the one vial of poison. It would take her days to make another vial. Of course, all of this assumed the poison would even work.

Just do it, she told herself. *You can't change any of that now, and you have nothing to lose by trying. Except dying gruesomely…*

Taking a deep breath, Eliza pulled the glowing green vial from her pack, setting it gently on the ground in front of her. The troll stirred at the sound of the glass clinking against a pebble and Eliza froze. When it made no other movement, she let out a short breath.

Eliza began to move her hands through the familiar sequence of the spell as arcane words spilled from her lips in a whisper. The globe of water slowly began to form in front of her. As she neared the end of the incantation, she abruptly stopped speaking. The globe continued to hover in the air, its surface rippling rhythmically. Silently thanking the Great Black Sheep in her head – although she would never admit that to the Hippie – Eliza grabbed the vial and unstopped it. Then she poured the contents onto the orb.

The water swiftly turned a ghastly, glowing green. Moving her hands back into position, she said the final word of the incantation. Just like in Alma's garden, the orb exploded into a thick mist that swept into the cave. Except this mist glowed a sickly emerald and seemed to throb gently as it enveloped the sleeping troll.

Eliza watched in anticipation, her pulse pounding in her veins. Would it work?

The troll let out a snort and inhaled deeply, causing an eddy of mist to pour into its nostrils and mouth. At the same time, a wave of moisture began to pour out of the cave toward Eliza. Her eyes went wide, and she darted to the side to avoid the deadly substance, putting

the hem of her sleeve over her mouth.

The snorts inside the cave soon changed to a heaving cough. The ground trembled as the troll began to move, crashing into the stone wall of the cave awkwardly. It lumbered out of the cavern and Eliza tried to keep as still as possible; she didn't want to draw its attention.

The creature collapsed at the edge of the river, falling to its knees. It gave a series of great heaving coughs and then vomited into the river, pieces of bone and partially-digested flesh visible amid the bile. Eliza looked away, squeezing her eyes shut. Then she heard another crash and turned to find that the troll had fallen on its side. Its glowing green eyes caught sight of her, and it lifted a hand weakly in her direction while its chest heaved feebly

Eliza felt a bit conflicted as she watched the creature. Over the days spent gathering plants, she had frequently visualized killing the troll and finally getting her revenge. However, now that she saw the monster's pain-filled eyes and watched it struggle vainly to rise, she felt… guilty. Nothing deserved to die like this.

Taking pity on the monster, Eliza began casting an *Ice Bolt*. A shard of ice formed in the air in front of her as her fingers wound their way through the requisite gestures. The shard thickened quickly and then lunged forward – embedding itself in the Mountain Troll's eye. The creature thrashed for a second, its body spasming uncontrollably. And then it lay still.

Finally, a long-awaited notification flashed in the corner of Eliza's vision.

The Mountain Troll has died.

x3 Level Up!
You have (30) undistributed stat points.

Eliza heaved a sigh of relief, leaning against the edge of the cliff.

As the green mist cleared, she remembered why she was here. She needed to complete the Hippie's quest. She edged into the cavern, pulling the materials for a makeshift torch from her back and lighting the wooden wand. The torchlight soon illuminated the cavern, revealing piles of junk littering the back wall. Weapons, armor, and assorted knick-knacks filled the cavern, glimmering faintly in the light

cast by the torch.

Eliza approached the piles cautiously, her brow furrowing. Most players would probably be ecstatic at finding so much loot. However, Eliza didn't really have any way to carry all of this stuff. Besides, how on earth was she going to find the quest item amid all of this junk? She didn't even know what she was looking for.

"I found it!" a voice cried out and the Hippie's head popped up from one of the piles.

Eliza yelped in surprise and jumped back. "What the hell is wrong with you?" she yelled at the god, her patience finally cracking.

He glanced at her in confusion and then looked down at himself. "What do you mean? I'm a vision of health. Not like our troll friend out there." Then he looked back at his hand as though seeing the item for the first time. "Besides, I found the item of supreme power! You should be excited!"

The Hippie shuffled out of the pile of junk, with Fluffy following closely behind him. The sheep yawned tiredly and watch the scene with a bored expression as the god walked over to Eliza and shoved the item in her face.

"It-it's a brush?" Eliza asked.

"Not just any brush," the young man admonished her. "It's Fluffy's brush! See?" He walked over to the black sheep and proceeded to begin brushing his thick coat. Fluffy's eyes rolled back in bliss as he leaned into the Hippie.

Eliza just stared for a long moment.

"I…" she began. Then she stopped. There was no point.

Without any further ado, Eliza turned and marched out of the cave. She was going to return to her garden. If she ever saw the idiot god again, it would be too soon.

Chapter 8 - Daring

Eliza sat alone at the island in her kitchen, her hands nursing a cup of tea as she watched the screen that hovered above the nearby table.

"Welcome to Vermillion Live, the only place to get the most up-to-date news and events regarding Awaken Online," a man dressed in an immaculate suit announced.

"As most of you know by now, Lux has fallen to the Dark and has been transformed into the Twilight Throne. We have confirmed that this was accomplished by a single player – the infamous Jason."

The man frowned slightly before continuing, "In addition, it appears that the residents have been transformed into the undead, and now players can roll new characters as zombies or skeletons. Although it appears that many are reluctant to give this new race a try with the tenuous position of the Twilight Throne, with a mixed army of players and NPCs planning to march against the city. And then there is the hefty time lock on re-rolling a character…"

"You also forgot to mention the fact that Jason is a psychopath," the woman beside him spat. "I expect you all have seen the gameplay footage at this point. Alexion is right to be pulling together a group of players and NPCs to take out the Twilight Throne."

"It's just a game, Beth," the man replied with an arched eyebrow. "Sure, Jason's tactics are a bit unconventional, but you have to admit they're effective."

"Have you played this *game*? It may not be entirely real, but it *feels* real. Honestly, at a certain point what's the difference between killing someone in the real world or in-game? Besides, I'm not talking about killing another player in cold blood. I'm talking about these zombies. Would you like to experience being ripped apart?"

Eliza felt a little conflicted as she listened to their banter. She remembered feeling guilty for killing the troll. Well, to be more accurate, she had felt guilty about causing such intense suffering – even if it wasn't exactly real. She hadn't felt bad about *killing* the troll. He had smashed her to death after all. He sort of had it coming.

"But let's not take my word for it. We have gameplay footage!" the woman continued. "I expect many of you have seen this video from the night Jason conquered Lux." She waved at the screen behind her, which promptly flickered to life.

The camera view was from the perspective of a player. It was

nighttime, and the player was creeping toward what must have been the training grounds in Lux – a big open area dotted with straw dummies – or at least what was left of the training grounds.

The remains of bodies were scattered everywhere. Moonlight reflected off the pools of blood drenching the stones and the sides of buildings, and entrails littered the ground. Some of the corpses appeared to have either been ripped to shreds or blown apart.

The player moved toward a building in the center of the field, carefully picking his way through the dismembered corpses. An unusual and foreboding silence hung over the training grounds. The only sound that could be heard was the player's ragged breathing. As he approached the door to the building, the player gingerly opened the door and peeked through the crack. Inside was a group of humanoid creatures, their bodies broken and bloody. They stood still, staring mindlessly into the distance.

"Oh shit!" the player gasped involuntarily.

The noise promptly alerted the zombies in the room. A dozen milky white eyes were suddenly focused on the lone player. Time seemed to freeze as the zombies all stood still, staring at the player.

Then, with a throaty roar, the group of zombies rushed forward in a frenzy of limbs. In his panic, the player fell backward onto the ground, and the camera tilted erratically. The player was trying desperately to crawl away from the building.

The view panned back to the small building. The zombies slammed into the door and came pouring out, ripping the door off its hinges as they rushed at the player. Their wretched screams tore through the air, and their faces were wild as their hands clawed toward the prone player.

"Oh god no!" the player shouted. His hands came into view as he vainly tried to defend himself.

Then the zombies were upon him, and his body was torn apart in a flurry of limbs, teeth, and blood. Although the pain sensors in-game were heavily muted, the player let out an anguished scream as he was ripped apart. Likely, the psychological horror of what was happening was worse than the dull pain he felt.

Then the screen went black.

Eliza sat in shock for a moment. Jason had done this? She had seen the in-game notices and heard the whispers among the other students during her prep classes. He was rumored to be able to summon the dead, but she hadn't actually seen his creatures in action before. She knew that she should be repelled by his actions. Yet a part of her was… impressed?

Suddenly, a door slammed on the other side of the house, and a moment later her mother walked into the kitchen. "Hello, Eliza," she

greeted her. Eliza didn't miss the fact that her mother's eyes had darted to the pile of unopened books on the kitchen table nor did she miss the disappointed frown that curled her lips.

"Hello," Eliza said softly, repressing the frustration that welled in her chest as her eyes dropped back to the table. She only had a week left until her reprieve from studying was over.

Soon, she wouldn't have any time to log back into AO. This depressed her more than she cared to admit. She would never tell this to the Hippie, but she had enjoyed inventing a new poison. If she were honest with herself, she had also enjoyed defeating the troll. Inside the game, she just felt… free.

Eliza glanced back up at the screen, where one of the few still images of Jason flickered across the screen. He appeared to be a slender young man, his face and clothes obscured by a dark billowing cloak. He was a single person who had taken down an entire city by himself. He wouldn't let himself get backed into a corner.

"Who is that?" her mother asked distastefully as the commentators continued their banter. Eliza quickly lowered the volume – not wanting her mother to hear the details.

"He's another player in that game you and dad got me," Eliza said. "He's quite famous at the moment actually."

"For playing a *game*?"

"Yes, for playing a game," Eliza replied softly.

For some reason, her mother's disapproving tone made her want to log back in even more. She didn't have much time left. Her eyes turned back to the screen. What would it be like if she acted without restraint like Jason? What would happen if she just accepted the role the Hippie was trying to force upon her?

A part of her was curious to find out.

Chapter 9 - Unperturbed

Eliza was kneeling in Alma's garden, plucking at the weeds that sprouted from the bed in front of her. As she pulled another obnoxious plant, she jerked her hand back abruptly, barely dodging the thorny vine of a Lashtail. She glared at the offending brown bush – that was the fourth time in the last half hour that it had tried to attack her. It almost felt like the plant had a personal vendetta against her.

She wiped a hand across her brow, small droplets of sweat beading on her skin as her eyes took in the garden. Rays of golden sunlight rested gently across the petals and stalks of the many plants that filled the small enclosure. A gentle breeze rustled through the leaves and felt cool to the touch. Not for the first time, Eliza marveled at the realism of this world – relishing the sensation. If only she could stay here.

That thought gave her pause. Eliza didn't have much longer to continue playing this game. Yesterday evening, her mother had started harping about one of her co-worker's kids. Apparently, she had already been accepted into an ivy-league university – at sixteen no less. Her mother apparently viewed this as some sort of competition and had not-so-subtly urged Eliza to return to her studies.

"Why the troubled expression?" a voice spoke up from behind a nearby hedge. Eliza couldn't help but wince as she recognized the speaker – her fears confirmed a moment later as the Hippie's inquisitive face popped up over the line of leaves. Yet she supposed she should be thankful. The idiot god had left her alone for a grand total of a day this time.

"You wouldn't understand," Eliza grumbled, returning to her work and pulling at the weeds that had grown up around the Willowbark in front of her. Each leaf of this plant was roughly ridged – imitating the bark of a tree. She knew that, when the leaves were ground up, they could be used to create a Fortification Potion, which increased a player's natural damage resistance.

"You might be surprised!" the Hippie exclaimed, deftly hopping over the hedge and taking a seat on the ground beside her – spreading out and lounging among her plants. "Fluffy says that I'm a fantastic listener."

As though he had summoned the sheep, Fluffy trotted around the hedge and up to Eliza, demanding his usual attention before finding a nice sunny spot to take a nap.

"Although," the Hippie continued, tapping his lips, "I suppose

he might have been asleep for several of our conversations."

"That isn't exactly surprising," Eliza murmured, trying her best not to respond to the god's teasing. She was beginning to think he was deliberately trying to get a rise out of her.

A finger suddenly touched Eliza's chin and gently encouraged her to look at the Hippie. She found his face hovering much too close for comfort, the amusement gone from his eyes and replaced with concern. "Nope. Something is definitely wrong. You look positively glum."

He retreated slightly rubbing at his chin thoughtfully. Then, before Eliza could respond, he snapped his fingers. "I've got it! You just need something to distract you! Perhaps another glorious quest. Let's see. I'll need to get creative with this one."

The god bounced to his feet and began pacing next to Eliza as he mumbled to himself. She couldn't help but note that the Lashtail seemed to lean away from the Hippie as he crossed back and forth in front of the plant. For once, she could sympathize with the irritating bush.

"I really don't think that's necessary…" Eliza tried to say.

"Nonsense!" the Hippie interrupted. "I just came up with a splendid idea. You're going to love this one. Fluffy's coat now has a fantastic sheen – see, it positively glows," the god said, gesturing at the sleeping sheep. From Eliza's perspective, it looked about the same. She wasn't really sure how you could improve on black wool.

The Hippie frowned as he noted Eliza's less than glowing reaction. "*Anyway*… I've been telling Fluffy that we need to accessorize. You know, add something to really make his eyes pop?"

"He looks fine to me," Eliza replied cautiously.

The young man leaned forward, cupping his mouth with his hand and whispering conspiratorially, "Just between you and me, he has been looking a little frumpy, and he has been acting self-conscious lately. I'm thinking a makeover would do the trick to rouse him from this slump."

Eliza noticed Fluffy's ears flick slightly and he opened one irritated eye behind the Hippie's back, glaring at the god. Eliza tried her best to stifle a laugh as the Hippie stared at her expectantly. She opened her mouth to give him her usual response – that she was too busy, and she had no interest in his inane quests. But then she hesitated, remembering the game footage she had witnessed last night and her secret yearning to do something as meaningful as Jason. She also couldn't help but recall her mother's incessant nagging.

"You know what? Sure, I'll help out," Eliza replied finally, meeting the Hippie's gaze firmly.

"Oh, come on! It really won't be so bad," the Hippie began and

then stopped short, a confused look on his face. “Wait. Did you just accept?” He glanced at Fluffy. “Am I going mad? Or was I already mad to begin with…” the god trailed off, clearly flustered by Eliza’s response.

She would normally have savored the moment a bit more, but Eliza was genuinely curious to find out what the Hippie had planned for her next. The encounter with the troll hadn’t exactly turned out the way she had been expecting.

“I’ll help,” Eliza repeated before the god began inspecting his own sanity too closely. That was a rabbit hole that she would rather avoid traveling down. “What exactly do you have in mind?”

The Hippie’s head whipped back toward her, his mouth splitting into a huge grin. “Oh, you’re going to love this one. I think that Fluffy needs a new collar!” He held up a finger. “But not just any collar. We can only use the finest materials for a sheep of his majesty and royal demeanor.”

Taking a deep breath, the god leaned in close and continued in a theatrical whisper, “In the deepest parts of the nearby forest, there is a beast that is rumored to wander among the trees. Its coat is said to be made of starlight, and its grace and speed are unparalleled among this world’s creatures.”

The Hippie raised a finger. “But take care! Many hunters have sought this prize, only to come up shorthanded. This beast is as elusive as it is beautiful.”

Eliza raised an eyebrow as she listened to the god’s description of the creature. “So… um, what exactly is it? Is it going to be some sort of dragon? Or maybe a basilisk that will turn me to stone? There has to be a catch.”

“You wound me,” the Hippie said, straightening and placing a hand on his chest. “Are you implying that I would somehow send you into peril without sufficient information?”

Eliza just stared at the Hippie with a deadpan expression. That was exactly what she was trying to say.

His face split into another grin, and the god continued, “Okay, fine. Perhaps that’s fair after the encounter with the troll.” He sighed deeply. “It’s a deer okay? I want you to go hunt a deer. Is that so bad? I think the local townspeople have begun calling it the Silver Stag.”

“Is it an acid-spitting deer with razor-sharp fangs?” Eliza asked, her expression dead serious.

“Where do you get such… No. No, it’s just a deer. Fluffy tail, little hooves. You know, a deer. Do they not have these animals where you come from?” the Hippie demanded, looking annoyed.

“Of course, but they usually don’t breathe fire…” Eliza said, trailing off as she saw the Hippie’s face growing red. Teasing him was

rather fun.

"Fire? I didn't mention any fire," The Hippie snapped, before suddenly looking confused and glancing at Fluffy. "Or did I? Maybe I forgot?" He began to pace again and grumble to himself. Then he suddenly whirled on Eliza. "You're messing with me aren't you?"

"Perhaps a little," Eliza replied with a small smile.

The Hippie snorted in frustration. "Well, do you want to take the quest or not? Not that it likely matters to you, but Fluffy's wardrobe hangs in the balance while you make jokes!" The sheep took this opportunity to glance at Eliza, and she could have sworn she saw amusement in his glassy eyes.

"I'm not sure…" Eliza began. "I haven't really seen any of the details yet." She waved at the air in front of her in mock confusion.

The Hippie looked like he was about to say something, but he must have thought better of it. Instead, he snapped his fingers. A prompt immediately appeared in front of Eliza:

New Quest: Fantastic Fashion

The Hippie would like you to hunt down a creature that lives deep within the forest beside Falcon's Hook and that the local townsfolk call the "Silver Stag." It's definitely a deer, and you would be incredibly ungrateful and rude if you were to keep challenging the Hippie's honesty. He has always shown himself to be an upstanding and forthright god…

Difficulty: A
Success: Slay the Silver Stag and return its pelt to the Hippie.
Failure: Fail to kill the stag or return its pelt. Continue to question the Hippie's unwavering integrity.
Reward: Unknown

Eliza couldn't help but smile as she reviewed the quest text. Apparently, she had really struck a nerve with the capricious god. She glanced up to ask if Fluffy would vouch for the Hippie's honesty but discovered that the Hippie and Fluffy had vanished and she now stood alone in the garden.

Her eyes moved back to the notification hovering in the air, her hand hesitating to accept the quest. Despite her teasing and the god's promises, she expected that this was going to be more complicated than the Hippie had let on. The troll quest had taught her that much

at least. Yet she could feel a small buzz of excitement pulsing through her veins. For some reason, the thought of another quest wasn't as terrifying as she had expected.

Before she could hesitate or talk herself out of it, Eliza's hand slammed down on the "accept" button, and the screen vanished. There were no fireworks and no epic music played. Alma's garden was just as she had left it, the breeze gently rustling the leaves of the plants. Her gaze shifted to the dense trees that ringed the compound, and she suddenly realized that the god hadn't given her much information – like where she might find this Silver Stag or how she was going to kill it.

"Now what do I do?" Eliza murmured.

Chapter 10 - Adventurous

Eliza hefted her pack and eyed the tree line next to Alma's compound skeptically. With a sigh, she pulled up her inventory menu and checked her crafting supplies. She had been putting off the journey for the last few hours, telling herself that she needed to prepare more potions and spend just a few more minutes getting ready. However, she knew the truth. She was just procrastinating.

"Going somewhere?" Alma asked, causing Eliza to jump slightly. She turned to find the elderly woman exiting the garden, a basket filled with rather ordinary-looking vegetables in her hand.

"I… I was going to go into the woods," Eliza said, struggling to come up with an explanation for her odd quest that didn't involve mentioning the Hippie or his pet sheep.

"Well, that's good. We could use some more Ferntail if you find any," Alma replied with a nod of her head. "Just be careful. There are many wild animals in the woods – some of which aren't particularly friendly."

"I will," Eliza murmured as she watched the older alchemist shuffle up to her cottage. For a brief moment, she considered just going inside with Alma and helping her cook lunch.

No! You don't get to cop out that easily, she reprimanded herself. *You agreed to this – you wanted this. Now follow through!*

With that thought, Eliza took a tentative step toward the woods.

Then another.

Before she knew it, she had walked much deeper into the forest than she ever had before. The trees towered around her, their branches crisscrossing in the air and creating a thick latticework of leaves that blocked out the sun and cast the forest in a gloomy haze. It almost seemed ominous the way the light had begun to recede, but Eliza shook off those thoughts. It didn't help to wring her hands at this point.

She had been following a small hunting trail away from Alma's compound, the thin path winding its way between the trees and undergrowth. Eliza struggled to make it through some parts of the path, having to climb over fallen trunks and wedge between several bushes. A real dagger or machete would probably have been useful.

Despite her endless preparations, Eliza hadn't thought that far ahead. In fact, as she thought about her weapons, she realized she was relatively defenseless. She had the little knife she used around the

garden, and, at some point, she had picked up a walking stick – a habit from another world. However, she didn't expect that the roughhewn branch would provide much help if she was attacked by something like the troll.

What she did have was her magic.

Her *Ice Bolt* might come in handy, but it took a few seconds to cast. She hadn't tried *Cold Grasp* yet, but the Hippie had explained that it was some sort of area of effect ability. There hadn't been much need for the spell in Alma's garden. Finally, she had her mist – which she now knew she could imbue with poison – assuming her hypothetical enemy let her call a "time out" so that she could suspend the spell and pull out a poison vial. The problem was that all of her spells were time-consuming. If anything were to actually attack her, she'd probably have little opportunity to react.

Great. I'm going to die. Again, she thought bleakly.

With that happy thought, Eliza turned a corner on the trail and almost ran smack into a group of players. As soon as they caught sight of her, the group had multiple weapons leveled at Eliza, flames curling around the head of a staff and more than one projectile pointed at her head. The player in the lead was a burly warrior wielding a wicked-looking one-handed axe.

Eliza pulled up short, her mouth forming a small "O." "I… I'm sorry," she stuttered, raising her empty hands. "I'm just collecting herbs."

The lead player dropped his axe, waving a hand at his teammates. "Relax, it's just one girl. She doesn't look like a PK'er."

"PK'er?" Eliza echoed, her heart still beating rapidly. "What do you mean?"

The player cocked his head at her quizzically, causing his mail armor to clink gently. "How long have you been playing? Nevermind. It means 'player killer.' There are quite a few people out in these woods hunting and leveling. Most don't mind killing another player and taking their equipment."

Eliza inadvertently took a step back, eyeing the players with a newfound suspicion. She hadn't considered the possibility of players killing one another for loot – although it seemed obvious in retrospect. Perhaps she had been worried about the wildlife when she should have been focused on avoiding other people.

"Don't worry," the mage said, the woman noticing Eliza's expression. The player looked at Eliza kindly, and the flames around her staff began to dissipate. "We're not going to hurt you. We were just out here leveling. I guess we're on edge. This game can be a little… intense."

The warrior nodded in agreement. "My only point was that you

should be careful out here by yourself." The man hesitated for a moment, looking back at his teammates and receiving a few not-so-subtle nods. "Actually, do you want to group up with us? An alchemist might be useful if you're carrying a bunch of healing potions. Plus, you could gain some experience."

Eliza almost said yes, but then stopped herself. She couldn't really explain why she was out here. What if they ran into the stag? Would they just let her keep the pelt? It was difficult to imagine that the players would simply go along with her explanation that a homeless god had told her to kill some sort of magical deer.

"I… I appreciate it, but I'm almost finished," Eliza explained timidly. "I just need to gather a few ingredients, and then I'm heading back to town."

"No worries, we were actually thinking of heading back to town soon anyway," the warrior said with a nod of his head, before motioning to the group around him to continue forward. The rest of the players trudged past her, heading back the way she had come. "Stay safe," the warrior called over his shoulder before they disappeared around the bend in the hunting trail.

Eliza's eyes lingered on the trail for a few more seconds as she considered what the players had told her. She had just gone through the process of cataloging her weapons – or lack thereof. Other people might be useful. Apart from her victory against the troll, she wasn't exactly combat worthy, and even that conflict had been a little lopsided. She wasn't certain that ambushing a sleeping monster really counted as a "battle."

Yet there was little she could do about that now. As usual, the Hippie had placed her in another precarious position. Not that she was surprised. He seemed to enjoy tormenting her. Grumbling under her breath about lazy idiot gods, Eliza decided to keep pushing forward.

Perhaps it was for the best that she had to handle this quest alone. Even in the real world, she didn't exactly attract friends. If anything, the students in her prep courses just viewed her as competition – making nasty little comments and snubbing her from joining their groups. Why should it be any different in-game? People were still people, after all.

Lost in her gloomy thoughts, Eliza didn't notice the bear until she had almost walked into it. The creature's rumbling growl was the first indication that she might be in trouble. She glanced up quickly to find herself face-to-face with what appeared to be a real-world grizzly bear. The massive creature stared at her with red eyes and a snarl reverberated its lungs. A quick *Inspection* revealed the following:

Grizzly Bear – Level 22
Health – 500
Mana – Unknown
Equipment – None
Resistances – Unknown
Weakness – Unknown

Without thinking, Eliza began to back away slowly, taking a few tentative steps. This was apparently the wrong move, and the bear reared up on its hind legs, towering almost eight feet into the air before slamming its clawed paws back onto the trail – causing the ground to tremble slightly. The creature was only standing a few yards away, glaring at her menacingly. How could she have missed it? She should have been paying attention!

"Oh shit," Eliza murmured, her mind wheeling. She tried to recall the little she knew about confronting bears in the real world – something about yelling at them or posturing… That didn't seem like it would be effective here. Although, fighting the hulking beast also seemed like it would just result in her untimely death.

Which left one option.

She glanced at the area around her, trying desperately to find somewhere she could run. A tree stood to her side, a single low-hanging branch relatively accessible despite her short stature. A tentative, desperate plan began to form in her mind.

As the bear took a lumbering step forward, Eliza bolted. She darted for the tree beside her, jumping and grabbing at the branch. In the real world, the tree limb would likely have been out of reach, but, with her slightly enhanced statistics, she managed to just barely make the jump and her fingers curled around the rough bark. She desperately pulled herself up as she heard the thunder of the bear's paws striking the ground behind her and the drumbeat of her own heart. At the last second, she managed to scramble onto the branch just as the bear's paw crashed into the base of the tree.

Eliza chanced a glance down and immediately wished she hadn't. She could see that the single swipe of the bear's claws had torn deep grooves in the base of the tree trunk, and it was already rising on its hind legs and clutching at the base of the tree as it began to climb – seemingly undeterred that its prey had fled into the trees.

Moving quickly, Eliza climbed further up tree's wide limbs, the occasional stray branch scraping the skin of her hands and arms as she hauled herself up. Within only a few seconds, she sat nearly twenty feet above the bear, clutching at the trunk of the tree to maintain her precarious balance.

To her dismay, the grizzly had made good progress as well, its

claws digging into the bark and hauling up its bulk. She wouldn't have long before it reached her perch in the tree. Moving quickly, Eliza's hands began twining through the gestures of her *Ice Bolt* spell, a shard of ice forming in the air before her. It was difficult to maintain her balance since she had to use both hands to cast the spell – the whole process made worse by the fact that tree limb beneath her trembled and shook as the bear made its ascent. She tried her best to aim the spell, the bolt dancing erratically as she attempted to focus.

As Eliza completed the spell, the shard raced forward… and shattered harmlessly against the ground near the bear. Her aim had been off, and the creature had already inched its way closer, its massive claws scraping against the tree trunk and its mouth opening in another growl – revealing a massive pair of fangs.

Her thoughts raced, and her heart thumped in her chest as she watched the beast. It was all she could do to keep her balance on the tree limb, much less aim her spells. In her desperation, Eliza tried *Cold Grasp* instead. Her hands trembled as they wound through the gestures of the new spell and a ring of blue energy began to form along the trunk of the tree beside the grizzly. A moment later, the spell completed, and spikes of ice abruptly jutted from the ring of energy.

The icy spears thrust into the bear's torso, blood bubbling around the wounds, and the creature let out a massive roar of pain. The beast gave a mighty heave, the lances of ice breaking in half with a crunch – leaving several spears embedded in its side. The entire tree trembled as the bear tried to avoid falling, its claws curling around a nearby branch and scraping at the bark frantically. It managed to regain its balance and only seemed more enraged by Eliza's spells as it continued to climb.

Eliza spared a glance at her mana pool and saw she could cast the spell a couple more times, and so, acting quickly, she began casting again and again. Glowing azure rings continued to appear along the trunk, followed shortly by lances of ice that speared outward and into the bear's flesh. However, even when Eliza managed to land a direct blow, the creature shrugged off the attacks, seemingly undeterred despite the blood that now stained its matted fur.

In her haste, she missed the next few spells, the frozen spears lancing harmlessly into the air. Yet the ice inadvertently created a veritable wall between her and the bear – the lances forming a makeshift barrier, and thick ice coating the surrounding bark. This slowed the bear's progress since its claws had trouble finding purchase on the slick surface. The beast tentatively smacked against the icy barrier to no avail, letting out a massive bellow of frustrated rage as it realized that it wouldn't be able to make it to its prey.

Eliza used the momentary lull to pull a mana potion from her

pack and quickly chug its contents, noting that the potion began to restore her waning mana supplies. At the same time, the bear seemed to give up its chase, and the entire tree shook as the beast let go and landed heavily on the ground below. It then began pacing around the base of the tree, sniffing at the trunk.

She almost breathed a sigh of relief, but immediately froze as the creature met her gaze – its eyes filled with rage. It had no intentions of giving up. With an uncanny intelligence, the bear turned to the trunk, extending its claws and swiping experimentally at the base of the tree. The blow caused fragments of bark to cascade out from the impact site, and the tree lurched to the side. The beast snorted as it heard Eliza's yelp of surprise and immediately followed up with another attack, its claws scraping deep furrows in the wood.

"Oh shit," Eliza murmured, quickly realizing that the bear was planning to bring down the entire tree – and her with it.

She frantically began casting *Ice Bolt*, a shard of ice forming in the air before launching forward at a frightening pace. Her aim was better this time, and the lance struck the bear in the side of the neck, bright-red blood welling around the wound and staining the forest floor.

However, the beast ignored the blow and kept going, its claws swiping at the tree again in a frenzy as Eliza kept casting her spells – trying her best to aim as the tree swayed beneath her. The race was on now, and it was all she could do to keep casting *Ice Bolt* in the vain hope of slaying the bear before it brought down the entire tree. Bolt after bolt of ice crashed into the beast's form, penetrating its torso and neck. Meanwhile, she could feel the entire tree tremble as the bear tore into the trunk.

As the tree gave a final shudder and threatened to collapse, Eliza summoned one last icy spear, her heart beating hard in her chest and despair curling in her stomach. The fragment danced and spun erratically in the air as it pieced itself together. This time, she used every last ounce of concentration to aim the shard.

Time seemed to slow as the bolt raced forward, Eliza's breath caught in her throat as her eyes traced its trail. The bear reared up, readying itself for a final swipe. Just as it was about to strike, the shard penetrated its eye, a massive spurt of blood erupting from the wound.

The bear abruptly stopped its attack, roaring in pain as it clawed at its own eye. Its claws had shattered the end of the projectile, but it was unable to pull out the fragments of ice that had already been embedded in its eye socket.

Eliza capitalized on her opportunity, summoning yet another *Cold Grasp*. The blue circle appeared under the bear, centered on its

neck as it writhed on the ground and pawed frantically at its face. As she finished casting the spell, lances of ice speared upward, piercing the creature's neck and erupting from the other side in a spray of hot blood. The bear twitched and struggled against the spears pinning it to the ground, its growls turning into gurgling coughs.

A moment later, the creature finally lay limp and unmoving.

The Grizzly Bear has died.

x1 Level Up!
You have (5) undistributed stat points.

Eliza still sat perched in the tree, her breath coming in ragged gasps as she stared down at the bear's corpse. Shards of ice littered the tree trunk and the ground around the tree, the crystalline surface of the spears stained crimson with the beast's lifeblood. The ground around the tree had been trampled flat, and fragments of bark and wood lay across the area.

As Eliza took in the scene of destruction, she couldn't quite believe that she was still alive. On top of that, she had actually taken out another creature in-game! However, that thought immediately gave her pause, the evidence of the hard-won battle still lingering around her. She had only barely made it through the fight and only by immediately fleeing up a tree. At this thought, the sudden flush of victory vanished – replaced with a sense of despair that curled and coiled in her stomach like a living thing.

A single question kept bouncing around her head. If it was this difficult to take out a normal beast her own level, what hope did she have of slaying the Silver Stag?

Chapter 11 - Aimless

Eliza had been wandering the forest for hours now, to the point where the entire journey had begun to blur together into an endless series of tree trunks and leafy branches. If it weren't for her map, she was pretty sure she would have gotten lost many times over. At that thought, she slumped against a tree and let out an exasperated sigh.

Not only had she wasted an incredible amount of time, she hadn't once caught sight of anything that even remotely resembled a deer, let alone a silver one. She had passed several groups of players, being cautious not to draw too much attention to herself. And, luckily, she had avoided any more encounters with the local wildlife – having become accustomed to scouting ahead and keeping a *Dexterity* potion in hand in case she needed to run. She had learned her lesson with the bear.

"I leave for a few minutes, and you're already lazing about," the Hippie abruptly spoke up, appearing from behind a nearby tree with Fluffy in tow. "For shame!"

"Minutes?" Eliza grumbled. Of course, the Hippie would show up now to taunt her for her failure. "Try hours. And I haven't seen this silly deer once."

"Oh, really?" the god replied in surprise, his eyes wide. "I thought this would be an easy quest – a slow pitch, if you know what I mean."

Eliza closed her eyes, rubbing at her temple with one hand. "Easy? This forest is huge, and I'm looking for a single creature. Plus, there are a ton of players wandering around killing everything in sight. You could at least narrow down my search a little."

"Hmm, hardship builds character," the god replied, leaning against the tree next to Eliza. "Besides, giving away the location of the Silver Stag would be cheating. I never took you for a cheater!"

Fluffy took this opportunity to trot up to Eliza and rub his head against her thigh. The sheep looked up at her with an expression that almost looked like compassion. Without thinking, she reached out and petted his head, watching as the sheep's eyes promptly rolled back in bliss.

"This just seems impossible…," she murmured.

"Hmm, then perhaps you aren't looking at it from the right angle," the Hippie replied.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Eliza demanded, glancing over at him.

The god shrugged. “Well, every time that Fluffy and I put on one of our famous theatrical productions, we have to get in character. You know, really try to put ourselves in our character’s shoes. Maybe it would help for you to do the same here.”

“Wait, what? You put on plays?” Eliza asked in confusion, glancing at the Hippie uncertainly.

“Eternity can be a real drag let me tell you,” the god groused. “We have to find things to occupy ourselves.” At Eliza’s skeptical expression, the god continued defensively. “Don’t look at me like that! Fluffy is becoming a rather experienced playwright. He has several companies considering his manuscripts, and we’ve gotten some excellent feedback so far.”

Eliza risked a glance at the sheep beside her and noticed him shaking his head subtly. Just how much of the conversation was Fluffy able to follow? Not for the first time, she questioned whether the sheep was special somehow.

“Anyway, this is all beside the point,” the Hippie said, waving a dismissive hand. “What I’m saying is that you need to get in character. You know, think like a deer.”

“Think like a deer?” Eliza echoed skeptically.

“Yeah. You know, deer things. Erm… like eating grass?” The god’s gaze shifted to Fluffy. “That’s what deer eat right?” he whispered to the sheep – which earned him something that looked remarkably like a shrug.

“Or maybe deer drink stuff? Like beer… No, that doesn’t sound right. Maybe water? I guess?” The Hippie now looked really confused, and he sighed heavily. “I’m just now realizing that I know nothing about deer. Fluffy is always much better at animal husbandry. He actually wanted to be a veterinarian in his youth. It seemed like such a good fit given his upbringing.”

Eliza just ignored the god’s ramblings. Amid all of the random gibberish was the semblance of a good idea. Maybe she had been approaching this all wrong. Simply wandering through the forest didn’t seem like it would be successful. She “might” run into the Silver Stag randomly, but it wasn’t a sure thing. What if she changed tactics? If she could identify an area that the deer would need to visit, then she could lie in wait.

The fragments of a plan were beginning to piece themselves together in her mind.

“Hmm, that’s actually not a bad idea,” she murmured.

“Oh, I’m so glad you like the idea for our new indie brewery,” the Hippie exclaimed. “Fluffy has been skeptical, but I think Beastly Brews is a great name. We were thinking of starting with some stouts and porters for our first batch…”

As he noticed Eliza shaking her head, the god trailed off. “What on earth are you talking about?” Eliza asked. Apparently, she had tuned out his jabber for a few seconds, and he had gone off on an oddball tangent.

“What are *you* talking about?” the god demanded.

“Finishing your quest… You know, finding the Silver Stag,” Eliza said slowly, once again questioning the god’s sanity.

“Ahh, yes! Looks like you have a lot of work to do and Fluffy and I should really get *hops-ing* on that brewery idea. I think I already have an idea for the logo…” the god trailed off as he walked behind the tree and abruptly disappeared. Fluffy spared one last apologetic look at Eliza before following the Hippie.

Eliza couldn’t help but sigh as she reviewed the conversation. Could a god even drink beer? Would alcohol affect him the same way as a human person? That thought gave her pause. Or maybe he was already drunk. That would actually explain a lot.

In any event, the crazy god had at least given her an idea of where to start. She had passed a small stream further back along the hunting trail. Perhaps the Hippie was right, and the Silver Stag did need to drink – just not beer. This game seemed realistic enough for that to be a possibility. If she walked along the stream or set up camp near a small pond, that might increase her odds of running into the animal.

It certainly seemed like a better plan than roaming the forest aimlessly.

With her mind made up, Eliza walked back down the path until she found the small stream. The water was barely a trickle, running over the smooth stones of the creek bed and heading south. A glance at her map confirmed that the town of Falcon’s Hook was due east – along with the shoreline – so maybe that meant that the stream would pool into a lake or pond further downstream. It seemed possible, at least.

Eliza made her way down the stream, the creek bed providing a much easier path forward that was unblocked by the dense vegetation of the forest. She was being cautious and kept one of her potions in hand so that she could flee if she needed to. If the stag was drawn to the source of water, then it followed that other animals and creatures would be drawn to it too.

Nearly an hour later, Eliza discovered that the stream terminated into a small lake. The surface stretched about fifty feet across, reflecting the sunlight. A quick inspection of the area revealed that several other small tributaries and streams fed into the lake. A glance at her map also showed that she was now far to the southwest of Falcon’s Hook and was at least a few hours from Alma’s compound.

She quickly scouted the area around the lake, noticing the impressions along the muddy edge of the shore. Eliza saw an odd mixture of paw prints. She had no idea what shape a deer's hooves would make – or if the Silver Stag even really looked like a deer. The Hippie wasn't exactly a trustworthy source of information. However, it did seem like the local animals used the lake as a source of fresh water.

"Now what do I do?" Eliza murmured to herself.

She supposed she should wait by the lake and see if the Silver Stag showed up. That might be safer than wandering the forest. With that thought, she took a seat against one of the trees a few yards from the shoreline. She still had an unobstructed view of the water, but she hoped that this would conceal her small form.

And so began the wait. Various animals stopped by the lake over time. She noticed a healthy bear population in the woods and some sort of creature that looked like a mutant boar – it's body much larger than she expected and gruesome tusks jutting from its mouth.

Then there were the magical beasts. Her blood froze in her veins when she caught sight of a massive birdlike creature, its beaked head affixed to a serpentine neck and bat-like wings jutting from its shoulders. Her *Inspection* revealed that the beast was called a Wyvern and it was a whopping level 150. She had kept very still while it drank, practically holding her breath until it finally disappeared.

After hours of sitting against the tree, Eliza almost missed the tell-tale signs of the silver-furred creature when it finally visited the lake – her eyelids drooping tiredly. At first, she thought she had imagined the creature and blinked rapidly to make sure she wasn't hallucinating. Surprisingly, the Silver Stag did look a lot like a deer. Yet it moved with a grace that seemed to defy physics, practically gliding up to the water. An intricate framework of horns jutted from its head and gave off an ivory glow in the soft light of the forest.

Eliza was careful to control her breathing, and she moved slowly as she climbed to her feet, afraid to disturb the beast. She quickly inspected the Silver Stag, hoping that her ability wouldn't reveal anything too crazy. After her experience with the Hippie, she still suspected that there must be a catch to this quest.

Silver Stag – Level ?
Health – Unknown
Mana – Unknown
Equipment – Unknown
Resistances – Unknown
Weakness – Unknown

Fantastic, Eliza mentally grumbled. The Silver Stag didn't seem to have a level – or it was so much higher than her that she couldn't determine its level. Either way, that was bad news. The inspection also hadn't revealed any additional information regarding the creature. So, she was flying blind. Again.

Not having any other choice, she decided she may as well fire an *Ice Bolt* at the creature. She would probably die – horribly. But she could always come back, and she needed more information if she was somehow going to slay the stag.

Just as her hands began to wind their way through the beginning gestures of the spell, a hail of missiles erupted from the far side of the lake, the black projectiles whistling through the air toward the Silver Stag. The creature looked up lazily, and Eliza could feel her stomach lurch. Then, with an almost bored expression, the deer seemed to teleport six feet to the side. The missiles slammed against the ground where the deer had been standing a moment before.

Eliza blinked a few times, trying to figure out what she had just seen even as another volley of projectiles raced through the air. She could now see that there were players standing on the other side of the lake – at least five men and women robed in heavy leather with longbows drawn. Their armor had been dyed a dark green, which explained why she hadn't seen them until now.

Her gaze was fixed on the deer this time, watching carefully as the missiles approached. In a blur of motion, the Silver Stag dodged to the side. It didn't seem to be casting a spell – it was just insanely fast.

At the same time, another group of players emerged from the brush behind the deer, creating a semi-circle around the animal and trying to cut off its retreat. The players wielded heavy spears, the iron tips glinting in the dull light that filtered through the trees.

The animal turned to look at the onrushing players skeptically. It didn't seem at all perturbed by its attackers or the new salvo of missiles that was racing through the air from the opposite end of the lake. As the first spear was thrust toward the creature, it suddenly moved. In a flash, it had gored a player's throat with its horns, the glowing ivory surface now stained crimson as the animal stood beside the player impassively.

The other players looked on with wide eyes, a shout going up through their ranks as they turned to try to stab at the Silver Stag. Yet the death of one of the attackers created a small opening, and the deer immediately took advantage. It raced away in a flurry of movement so fast that Eliza had trouble following it. Within only moments, the creature had completely disappeared.

"God damn it!" one of the players shouted, pulling Eliza's

attention back to the group of spearmen that still stood on the bank of the lake. A man had emerged from the woods behind the group of players and waved at them wildly.

"You knew how fast the damn deer was. I told you to thrust at the same time!" The man roared. He wore the same camouflaged leather armor as the rest of the group. "But this idiot just had to go and try to claim the kill himself," he spat, kicking at the player's corpse.

Eliza realized that she was still standing frozen next to her tree, her hands hovering in front of her – the spell now forgotten. She couldn't help but recall the advice she had received when she first entered the woods. Not all players were friendly.

Maybe I should get out of here, she thought to herself.

Before she could leave her perch beside the tree, she felt something sharp press against her side. "Don't move," a gruff feminine voice spoke from behind her. "One inch and you die. Nod your head if you understand." Eliza slowly nodded her head, not daring to try to look behind her as her heart raced in her chest.

"We have another player back here," the woman behind Eliza called. The group near the shore glanced over, and the man – who Eliza assumed was their leader – waved a hand in their direction.

"Move forward and keep your hands up," the woman said, prodding Eliza with what she assumed was the tip of a sword. Not knowing what else to do, she walked forward slowly, approaching the group of players along the shore.

"Who is this?" the leader demanded, glaring at Eliza.

"I found her on the other side of the lake," the woman behind Eliza explained. "It looks like she had spread out some potions and ingredients around her. I'm guessing she's an alchemist." As the woman finished speaking, she circled around Eliza, finally coming into view. Her kidnapper was wearing the same armor as her teammates, her dark hair bound behind her head in a tight ponytail and her eyes steely as she gazed at Eliza.

"I… I was just gathering ingredients," Eliza stuttered, trying to give this group the same story she had used with the other players.

"A likely tale," the leader groused, approaching her quickly. "You are quite far from town, and you're under-leveled for this area. There are foraging grounds much closer to town that have ingredients for basic potions."

Shit, Eliza thought. These players were clearly more competent and organized.

"Which means," the man drawled, "that you must be after the bounty on the Silver Stag. Not that a solo player at your level would stand any chance of killing the creature."

“Or she could just be a noob. The alchemy tools seem to mesh with the story at least,” the woman said, eyeing Eliza appraisingly. “What do you want to do with her?”

The leader grimaced. “Hmm. Either way, she saw our camping spot and our attack strategy. With the amount of money at stake here, we can’t afford to let her live. Just kill her and take any potions she has on her body,” he said with a dismissive wave of his hand.

The woman immediately drew a small dagger and placed it to Eliza’s throat, the edge drawing a faint line of blood. She couldn’t help but gulp as a heavy, dead weight settled in her stomach.

“Wait,” the leader commanded before stepping closer. A moment later, his face hovered only a foot away from Eliza. “Do not come back here or tell anyone what you saw. If you do, we will make it our sole task to hunt you down and kill you – repeatedly, until you’re only wearing rags and you don’t have a coin to your name. Do you understand?”

“Y-yes,” Eliza managed to gasp.

“Good,” the leader said and turned away.

“Goodbye, little alchemist,” the woman said and then, in a swift movement, she drew the dagger across Eliza’s throat.

A dull pain blossomed in Eliza neck, and her hands instinctively raised to her throat as she sank to the ground. A pained gurgle escaped her lips as red notifications flashed in her peripheral vision. As the world started to go black, she could see the woman rummaging through her pack, pulling out her hard-earned potions and pocketing them.

Then the world finally went dark.

System Message

You have died.

Thanks for playing Awaken Online!

Chapter 12 - Disheartened

"Damn it," Eliza muttered.

After respawning, she was now standing in Alma's garden. The sun had lazily moved toward the horizon, casting long shadows where the light drifted across the trees ringing the compound. Eliza slumped to the ground, her thoughts focused on the encounter with the players. An idle hand rubbed at her throat, and she could still feel a dull pain there – her mind clinging to the memory of her death despite the fact that she was now very much alive.

Eliza noticed her bag resting on the ground beside her, and, with a hollow pit in her stomach, she opened it slowly. She soon discovered that her entire stash of potions was gone. Her coins were also missing, not that she'd had much money to begin with. The only silver lining was that the other players hadn't bothered to take her remaining ingredients. She could only assume that there was little market in-game for selling alchemy materials at this point.

Closing her eyes, Eliza tried to stay calm. How was she supposed to finish this insane quest? Assuming she could somehow kill the lightning-fast creature, she still had to contend with the other players who were clearly hunting the Silver Stag. She also hadn't missed their mention of a bounty. Eliza had the almost irresistible urge to strangle the Hippie the next time she saw him, and she could already visualize her fingers wrapping around his irritating throat. He had omitted some important information.

A normal deer, huh?

"What are you doing out here, girl?" Alma asked, shuffling up beside her. The older woman's cane made a rhythmic thump as she approached. As she saw Eliza's pale face, her eyes widened in shock. "Are you okay? You look like you've seen death itself."

Eliza could only manage a weak chuckle. "You aren't too far off. Some players in the forest killed me, and I respawned here."

A flash of anger lit Alma's face before she managed to school her expression back to something more neutral. "Well, then I suppose it's lucky that you're a traveler too. If you had been a resident of this world, you wouldn't be coming back." Seeing that this didn't exactly cheer Eliza up, Alma continued, "Why don't you come inside? I've just finished brewing some tea. It would probably do you some good."

"Okay," Eliza muttered, tiredly rising to her feet. She didn't expect that tea was going to solve her problems, but neither would moping in the garden.

The pair entered Alma's cottage, and Eliza took a seat at a small, roughhewn wooden table. Her elbows rested against the coarse surface as she tugged off her glasses and rubbed at her eyes – her thoughts still troubled. A moment later, she heard a soft thump in front of her and opened her eyes to find a mug resting on the table, steam drifting atop its surface.

"Cantail Root mixed with some dried fruit. It improves the circulation," Alma said, taking a seat opposite Eliza. "These old bones need a little invigoration every so often."

Eliza sniffed at the tea skeptically and was surprised to find that it smelled like oranges – albeit rather muted. She took a hesitant sip, and a notification immediately appeared in her peripheral vision.

> Consumed Cantail Root Tea
> Stamina regeneration increased by 5/second.
> Duration 30 minutes.

Eliza was surprised to see the notification, although she supposed that this was the first time she had tried eating something in-game. It was interesting that even the food in AO had certain properties and she wondered idly if she could receive other bonuses for more complicated meals. She had always enjoyed cooking.

"So, tell me what happened," Alma said, jarring Eliza out of her reverie. The older woman's eyes were fixed on Eliza's face, and she found it difficult to meet her gaze.

Eliza wasn't really certain where to start. It wouldn't make sense to tell Alma about how she had been killed without first explaining why she had gone out into the forest in the first place – which meant bringing up the irritating, homeless god. Still, she found herself strangely compelled to tell Alma the truth. Maybe she was just tired of keeping secrets. As she ventured a glance at the kindly woman's face, waiting calmly for Eliza to begin, she made a decision.

"I-I was approached by a strange young man about a week ago, and he told me that he was a god," Eliza began tentatively. When Alma didn't reply – or break out laughing – Eliza continued, "He gave me a quest to kill a troll north of town. I actually managed to kill the monster by brewing a poison using some herbs I found in the forest."

She hesitated, finding it strange to tell the story aloud, since it sounded crazy even as she told it. Yet Alma made no attempt to interrupt, and she waited patiently for Eliza to continue. "When you asked me earlier why I was going into the forest… I-I lied. This god wants me to slay the Silver Stag and collect its pelt. I managed to find the animal by following a stream to a lake deep in the forest, and…"

Eliza trailed off, wincing as she recalled the encounter – both how easily the stag had slain one of the players and how quickly she had been captured and killed. “A group of travelers attacked the stag while it was drinking, but it killed one and got away. It was incredibly fast. I could barely follow its movements. Then the travelers managed to capture me, and they… they killed me and took my potions and money.”

As she finished speaking, Eliza could feel frustrated tears blooming at the corners of her eyes, unable to will them away. She swiped at her eyes with the back of her hand, her cheeks flushed with embarrassment. She couldn’t believe that she was crying in front of Alma. This was supposed to be a game. Why did everything have to feel so real?

“Well, that’s certainly an interesting tale. Although, I’m certain I just received the abbreviated version,” Alma finally said with a small chuckle. “To think my apprentice would become the target of a god… I assume he was a young man dressed in rags?”

Eliza looked up sharply, her mouth dropping open in surprise.

“Ahh, it seems I hit the mark,” the older woman continued. “Then you indeed met with the water deity – as unfortunate as that might be.”

“You’ve met him?” Eliza asked, finally regaining the power of speech as she shook off her surprise.

Alma grimaced. “Once. I wouldn’t wish to repeat the exchange. Yet his tasks usually come with a reward – just not always the one you expect.” A thoughtful look flitted across the alchemist’s face. “I think I can help you, girl. I can’t complete your task for you, but perhaps I can offer some guidance.”

“T-thank you,” Eliza said, taken aback by the older woman’s support. She had almost forgotten what it felt like for someone to listen to her and then offer to help with her problems. It felt like a weight had been lifted from her shoulders.

“It sounds like you face two challenges. The first is finding a way to slay this Silver Stag – which sounds like it won’t be easy,” Alma said, her voice sounding distracted as she stared off into space, deep in thought.

“And the second problem?” Eliza nudged the older woman to continue.

“Ahh, that would be the other travelers. If they’re also hunting this creature, then you need to find some way to defend yourself – either by incapacitating them or killing them,” Alma stated matter-of-factly. Eliza was forced to do a double take hearing the usually compassionate and friendly old woman speak so easily about killing others. She spent most of her time brewing healing potions for sick

townsfolk, after all.

Yet a hollow weight settled in Eliza's stomach. It didn't matter if Alma planned to help her. Eliza had no flair for combat – as the encounter with the bear had clearly demonstrated. "I have no idea how to kill even easy creatures, much less a team of other travelers," she muttered.

"Don't sell yourself short, my dear," Alma replied sharply, causing Eliza to glance up in surprise. She noted that the normally-kind woman's gaze was steely as it held her own. "You killed a troll after all – no small task for a novice water mage." Then she hesitated as a thought occurred to her. "Speaking of which, how exactly *did* you kill the troll? You mentioned poison?"

"Uh, like I said, I brewed a poison using plants I found in the forest," Eliza explained, looking down at her hands in embarrassment. She doubted that Alma would appreciate that she had used her herbalism training to kill another creature. "I didn't know what I was doing, so I basically just included every poisonous plant I could find in the mixture. The result was some sort of unidentified poison."

Alma nodded along with this explanation. "It sounds like you got lucky. On the other hand, luck is often the mother of invention. How did you administer the poison? Trolls are notoriously territorial. Did you sneak up on it?"

"Sort of," Eliza murmured, recalling the event vividly. "It was asleep in its cave, and I figured out that I could sort of… pause casting *Obscuring Mist* – which causes the ball of water to linger in the air. I then poured the poison on the sphere and completed the spell, which created a poisonous mist," Eliza explained awkwardly, feeling a little silly. In retrospect, she was surprised that she hadn't gotten beaten to a bloody pulp.

On top of that, she could only imagine that Alma thought she was a terrible person.

Eliza ventured a glance at the older woman, only to find a proud smile plastered on Alma's face, the wrinkles around her eyes crinkling. "Delightful. What a creative way to administer the toxin," Alma said, almost sounding excited. "I've considered using water magic as a vector for healing and toxins in other capacities… but the mist is a surprising adaptation."

Alma's gaze refocused on Eliza. "Have you been able to repeat the experiment? Pausing the spell, I mean. That might provide an effective means of fighting the players since you have some control over the mist itself."

"I actually haven't tried," Eliza said. Although, she didn't see how she could manage to cast the spell in the middle of a battle. She had only managed the feat with the troll because it had been asleep.

“I’m not really sure it would work, though,” Eliza muttered.

“Why ever not?” Alma asked in surprise. “I think you’re on to something there.”

“It’s too slow,” Eliza explained, her voice downcast. “I have to pause the spell and then add the poison. During a fight, that would be impossible.”

“Hmm, I see,” Alma said slowly, her eyes clouded in thought. “It seems that we would need to find a way to administer the poison more quickly. If we could reduce the spellcasting delay, then we could effectively weaponize the mist.”

Alma murmured to herself, distractedly. “We need a way to pour the poison… or inject it… Ahh, I think I have an idea!” the older woman exclaimed, smacking the table with her palm. “I have a friend in Falcon’s Hook that specializes in engineering projects. His name is Evan Crown and he creates custom instruments for people in town. I think he might be able to craft a staff that would allow you to inject the poison – perhaps as some sort of cartridge.”

Eliza couldn’t help but look at the older woman in surprise. That was actually a really good idea – assuming it was even possible. Yet as soon as she began getting her hopes up, they came crashing back down.

“You would just need to pay him a little coin,” Alma continued. “He might actually take a fancy to a project like this and offer a discount. I know he gets tired of repairing clocks and dock machinery. Something like this might be a welcome relief.”

Eliza couldn’t help but grimace. The only problem was that the players had stolen the small stash of coins she had accumulated running errands for Alma. She hesitated at that thought. Speaking of a “stash,” she couldn’t help but recall the mountain of junk in the troll’s cave – which was likely still lying there untouched. Perhaps she had been a little too hasty in storming off after the Hippie recovered Fluffy’s hairbrush.

I just hope it’s still there.

“I think I might know where to find some money,” Eliza began tentatively.

“That doesn’t sound ominous at all,” Alma replied with a small smile. “But knowing you, I’ll assume that you don’t have anything nefarious in mind.”

“Besides creating some sort of poison staff?” Eliza asked with a hesitant grin of her own.

The older woman barked out a laugh. “Fair point. I wouldn’t have expected my shy little apprentice to start inventing poisons – but I suppose you can’t judge a book by its cover.” With that statement, the conversation devolved into friendly banter and a discussion of

poisonous herbs.

As Eliza sipped at her tea and enjoyed the conversation with Alma, she felt a wave of relief wash over her. She now had a tentative plan. While it still didn't address how she was going to deal with the Silver Stag, maybe her new weapon would at least offer a way to deal with the players. It was a start, and she couldn't help but feel a little excited at the prospect.

Tomorrow she would visit Evan Crown.

Chapter 13 - Mechanized

Eliza approached the gates of Falcon's Hook, a gentle breeze tugging at her tunic and bringing with the muted smell of sea salt. Players and NPCs trudged along the pressed dirt road beside her, their clothing and armor showing signs of battle despite the fact that it was still early morning in-game. Eliza's thoughts wandered as she walked, but she made sure to keep her head down and avoid eye contact with the people nearby. She was carrying a ton of loot in her bags, after all.

She had spent the previous evening replenishing the potions she had lost – Alma being kind enough to offer up additional ingredients. As soon as the morning light began to crest the tops of the trees ringing Alma's compound, Eliza had returned to the troll's cave. Luckily, no one had bothered to explore the precarious ledge running along the river that led into the cavern, so the piles of assorted objects and armor still rested where she had left them. Not that she was really surprised. She had almost fallen into the water four times trying to make her way down into the ravine and then back up to the road.

Now she was crossing the gates leading into town, trying to be as nondescript as possible. For some reason, the idea of commissioning weapons to potentially kill other players made her nervous, and she glanced at the guards manning the gate warily. The two men eyed the passersby with a bored expression, their spears resting against the wall beside them. Clearly, security wasn't an issue coming into town – or perhaps they were simply overwhelmed by the number of people.

Heaving a sigh of relief as she made it through the gate without issue, Eliza quickly navigated the town. She made a beeline for the market on the northeastern side of Falcon's Hook. Alma had explained that Evan's shop was located on one of the roads adjacent to the cramped stalls, and she had marked the location on Eliza's map.

As she entered the marketplace, Eliza spotted a poster nailed to a wall next to the street. She came to an abrupt halt, and her mouth parted slightly in surprise.

A player stumbled into her from behind, almost throwing her to the ground. "Watch your step," the man groused before heading farther into the market.

"S-sorry," Eliza murmured, but the player had already disappeared among the roiling mass of other travelers and NPCs. Shaking her head, she turned her gaze back to the poster that had first captured her attention.

A familiar image was emblazoned across the coarse paper –

showing a deer with intricately curved antlers and silvery fur. Under the image, the words “House Baen Bounty: Silver Stag” were posted in capital letters. Eliza’s mouth dropped open in surprise when she saw the amount that was being offered.

“200 gold,” she muttered in shock. No wonder the players had gone to such great lengths to slay the creature – and had threatened her and then killed her to make a point. 200 gold was a fortune at this early stage of the game and would buy a small shop in town. Or, some really nice gear…

Not for the first time, Eliza had the almost irresistible urge to punch the Hippie in his stupid, grinning face. He could have explained that she wasn’t the only person hunting the damned deer, but no! In typical fashion, he had neatly skipped over that part. She hadn’t seen him in nearly a day in-game, so perhaps he was already anticipating her anger.

Growling slightly in irritation, Eliza continued into the market. It didn’t help to dwell on the irritating god. She needed to focus on figuring out a way to weaponize her *Obscuring Mist*. The players she had encountered likely wouldn’t be the last group she would run into if the bounty on the deer was that high. She needed to find a way to deal with them first.

Once she had some suitable weapons to defend herself, then maybe she could try to come up with some plan to slay the lightning-fast beast. Not that she was really optimistic…

A few minutes later, Eliza stood in a back alley running off the side of the market. The occasional barrel and crate littered the backstreet, and she could see players and NPCs milling past the entrance to the alley behind her. This looked like a good place for a mugging – and didn’t exactly scream “high-brow engineering shop.”

She was beginning to doubt Alma’s instructions when she finally discovered a crude wooden door affixed to the wall to her left. A tiny, faded shingle hung beside the doorway, the lettering washed out and nearly illegible. However, after running her hand across the wooden surface, she could just barely make out the words “Crown Mechanics” resting atop what might have once been the colorful image of a crown.

With a nervous sigh, Eliza pushed at the door, the wooden portal creaking open ominously. She could see a poorly-lit shop on the other side, the small space illuminated by several flickering candles on the far end of the room. She stepped inside cautiously, inspecting her surrounding with a careful eye. She didn’t see anyone inside, but her eyes widened as she took in the shop.

Every inch of the walls was lined with timepieces of all shapes and sizes – from grandfather clocks to lantern clocks. Where it wasn’t

possible to hang the clocks, they had been set carefully on long tables resting against the walls. The ticking hadn't been obvious from the street with the roar of the market to dampen the sound. However, inside the shop, it was almost overwhelming. What was more unnerving was that each of the clocks ticked in perfect sync, the rhythmic sound setting Eliza's teeth on edge.

Well, almost perfect.

Eliza could just barely detect a single sound that seemed slightly off. The noise was subtle below the monotonous clicking, but it was definitely there. She frowned, drifting around the store in search of the irregular ticking. After hunting for a moment, she hovered in front of one of the tables near the back of the store. A single clock rested on the wooden surface, a set of what looked like clock parts and gears lying beside it – the pieces organized in neat rows. Acting instinctively, Eliza inspected the broken timepiece.

Pendulum Clock
A typical and rather unnoteworthy clock. However, you detect that this timepiece is slightly out of sync with the rest of the shop – perhaps indicating that it needs to be adjusted or repaired. As though that wasn't already obvious…
Quality: C
Damage: NA
Durability: 2/15

"I was just about to finish fixing that one," a voice spoke up from beside Eliza, causing her to jump in surprise. She whirled to find a man coming through a door leading further back into the store. He was robed in a coarse woolen shirt and trousers, and he wore a thick leather smock.

"H-hi," Eliza managed to squeak out. "My name is Eliza. Alma said I should talk to you about a possible commission…"

The man nodded, taking a seat on a stool behind the nearby table. "Well, I expect you know my name then, so we can skip the pleasantries." As he spoke, Evan pulled back at the sleeve of his shirt, revealing his right arm. Eliza couldn't help but gasp slightly when she saw the appendage, which earned her an amused smile from the man.

Evan's right arm had been chopped off at the elbow and in its place now rested a mechanical contraption that more closely resembled a swiss army knife than a real arm. As she watched, a small screwdriver flicked out of a recessed pocket, swiveling in mid-air as he swiftly removed the panel from the front of the clock.

"Old injury," Evan said brusquely, nodding at his arm as he continued to disassemble the clock. "Not that it slows me down

nowadays. I've become so accustomed to my new arm that I barely miss the old one."

"It certainly looks useful," Eliza ventured hesitantly.

"Indeed. Now, let's talk about your commission," Evan replied, not bothering to glance up from his work. "Time's a wasting. Do you need something for your alchemy operation? A mechanical still perhaps? Or a portable burner unit? Ahh, no. Knowing Alma, you probably want a new distillation system."

"Umm…," Eliza began, a little overwhelmed by the man's barrage of questions. "Wait, is that really a thing? The portable burner?" She was a bit intrigued. That might be much more efficient than creating a campfire while she was out in the woods.

"Of course," Evan replied curtly, sparing a quick glance in her direction. "Although, judging from your reaction, that wasn't what you had in mind." A moment later, his attention was back on the clock, replacing and adjusting the interior gears in a rapid-fire series of movements.

"Well, you're right. I actually need something a little different. I was hoping you might be able to help me come up with an idea for how to accomplish my goal," Eliza said, mesmerized by the man's repairs. As she watched, he finished adjusting the gears and began replacing the front panel again, a new tool clicking into place on his arm.

"Which is…?" Evan asked without looking up.

"I need a staff that can inject a fluid into a spell mid-cast," Eliza explained, trying to be circumspect about how she intended to use the item.

"High or low viscosity?" Evan murmured, his brow furrowing in thought.

"Low viscosity – similar to most potions," she said cautiously.

"And how would you intend to use this item? Evan inquired. "For example, what would you visualize that it could do in an ideal situation?"

"When I cast *Obscuring Mist*, it forms a ball of water in front of me before expanding into a fog or mist," Eliza began. "I want to be able to eject the potion's contents from the staff directly into the orb without pausing the spell cast for more than a second or two."

Evan's head tilted to the side as he pondered this. "And what sorts of potions would you be injecting? I assume this would be used for healing and support tonics?"

"Actually," Eliza began and then hesitated. Did she really want to tell him how she planned to use the staff? Alma had told her to trust Evan, and the older woman hadn't steered her wrong so far. "I-ideally, this would be used as a weapon, and I would inject various

sorts of poisons…"

Evan abruptly stopped what he was doing, now looking at her with his complete attention. Instead of anger or judgment, she only saw excitement dancing in his eyes. "Weaponize a staff using poison, you say? Hmm…" he trailed off and then abruptly stood, beginning to pace around his small work area.

"A staff might work," he murmured, seemingly talking to himself. "It's a bit heavy, but the primary issue is that you will would need to be able to swap out poisons quickly for the different effects. The mechanism for automatically swapping out cartridges would be heavy – almost unwieldy really.

"Or…" A smile drifted across his face. "Maybe you don't need any of that. If we were to use several staves, you could pre-load the contents and carry multiple ammo types at one time." He spared a quick glance at Eliza, his eyes running from her feet to her head as he sized up her small form. "Hmm, no. That would be too heavy as well…"

Evan whirled back to Eliza, his eyes gleaming. "I think I have an idea! I would love to work on your project. You'll need at least three or four weapons, perhaps more as time goes on. I expect it will take me exactly two days, one hour, and fifteen minutes to complete the first batch. We could get started this afternoon!" As he spoke, Evan leaned forward in excitement, his mechanical arm twitching and whirring as he contemplated his new project.

"Three or four…" Eliza echoed in shock, surprised by the man's reaction. She had expected anger or judgment. But excitement? Evan reminded her more of a mad scientist than an engineer. It was something about the way his eyes gleamed as he watched her expectantly.

"Ahh, yes," Evan murmured to himself, looking slightly disappointed. "That might be a little costly, and we haven't discussed payment yet. Details, details." He glanced at Eliza's ragged and worn attire as though observing her for the first time. Then he sighed. "I guess we'll have to make do with one… although it won't work nearly as well with what I have in mind."

Eliza shook herself, trying to throw off her shock at the man's behavior. "Wait, I think I can afford to make more – at least if you're willing to barter for other equipment."

With that, she pulled out her pack and shook its contents onto the table in front of her. A random assortment of golden goblets, coins, weapons, and oddball pieces of armor poured out onto the table with a crash of metal. Eliza gave the pack one last shake, and a final silver coin landed on the pile and tumbled down its surface.

Evan just stared at the miniature mountain of loot, his fingers

tracing the bloodstains along one piece of armor tentatively. “I-is this okay?” Eliza asked nervously when he didn’t say anything.

The engineer finally looked up at her, a broad and slightly manic smile painted across his face. “Oh, yes. This will do nicely.”

Evan offered his regular hand to seal the deal, and Eliza accepted it tentatively, slightly unnerved by the crazed look in his eyes. “I do believe we have a deal. I look forward to working with you, Eliza. It has been ages since I have built anything other than mundane contraptions.”

His eyes were still fixed on the miniature mountain of loot, his mental wheels already spinning as he contemplated Eliza’s project. “But this time… this time, I have a feeling we are going to build glorious instruments of destruction together.”

Chapter 14 - Surprising

"How did it go?" Alma asked. The older woman was waiting at the front steps of her cottage when Eliza arrived back at the compound. The sun still shone high overhead, and Eliza could hear birds chirping in the trees ringing the small group of buildings and the buzz of insects flitting through the nearby garden.

"Good, I think," Eliza said, mustering a nervous smile. "Evan said he would have the first prototypes finished in a couple days. He seemed rather *enthusiastic*," she offered tactfully.

Alma barked out a laugh. "You mean he had that crazed look in his eye and probably started working on the weapons before you had even left his shop."

"Well, yes actually," Eliza replied. "He seemed relieved to be tackling a project that didn't involve another clock, but in kind of a scary way…"

Alma nodded along with that explanation. "Well, now we need to focus on your next problem," the older woman said, her expression sobering. "Specifically, we need to develop a few poisons that you can use in conjunction with your new weapons."

Eliza's eyes widened at the alchemist's nonchalant explanation. Alma discussed the idea of brewing poisons the same way she asked Eliza to pull weeds or water the plants. "Umm, do you have some books that I could read or…" she began tentatively.

Alma's mouth split into a sly grin, and she spared a wink at the girl. "I can do you one better. Come along, I have something I want to show you." As she finished speaking, the older woman began hobbling toward the back of the garden, her cane making a rhythmic thump in the dirt as she moved.

Eliza had no choice but to follow. Although, she was confused as to where they were heading. Up ahead was a simple tool shed that had been erected near the back of the garden. Beside it stood a massive overgrown hedge that partially ringed the compound. Eliza had only been back there a handful of times – usually to retrieve a tool when working the garden.

"Ahh, here we are," Alma said a moment later, gesturing at the shack.

"The tool shed?" Eliza asked cautiously, glancing at the alchemist and beginning to wonder if she was slipping in her old age.

Alma's lips curled into a mischievous grin. "Not the shed, girl. The shrub beside it. Just watch," she explained.

Alma's eyes flashed a brilliant sapphire, and her hands began dancing through an intricate series of gestures. Before Eliza could question what was happening, the surface of the overgrown hedge rippled and contorted – the colors swirling together and then breaking apart like eddies of water. A moment later, the hedge had vanished entirely, revealing a cabin abutting the tree line – this one much larger than the other structures that made up Alma's compound.

"W-what was that?" Eliza asked in shock, eyeing the older woman.

"A simple illusion spell," Alma explained calmly, stepping toward the cabin. "There are many applications of water magic. While you have decided to utilize some of its more offensive abilities – there are other utility spells that can have interesting uses. This particular spell wouldn't prevent someone from stumbling into the structure by accident, but it would deter any curious passerbys. More powerful illusion magic can actually simulate touch, taste, and smell as well."

The older woman glanced over her shoulder with a smile. "I have found illusions to be extremely… *useful* in my occupation."

"As an alchemist?" Eliza asked in confusion. Why would someone who brewed potions for a living need to use illusion magic?

"Ahh, not quite," Alma replied, an excited smile curling her lips. "I wasn't sure whether to show you this, but you've proven yourself to be far more competent and inventive than my previous apprentice. So, I think we can make an exception." With that, the older woman pushed open the door to the cabin.

Inside was an alchemist's paradise. This wasn't a quaint cottage – it was a full-fledged laboratory. Stills and burners lined the walls, and glass tubing spiraled through the air in intricate patterns. Along one wall was a series of shelves holding all manner of multi-colored powders and pre-prepared herbs. The facility even had its own furnace. At the back of the lab was a large sheet that looked like it had been draped over a pile of boxes.

"To answer your original question, I think a more accurate title for my profession would be 'Royal Poisoner' – at least once upon a time," the older woman continued, gesturing around the room. "Nowadays, I still make a fine living selling these poisons up and down the Silver Coast to certain *discerning* customers."

"Wait, what?" Eliza asked, her mind wheeling as she looked at Alma in a new light. "But what about the potions you sell in town?"

Alma turned her gaze back to Eliza, noting the shock on her face. "Did you think I could afford this entire compound and the rare plants growing in my garden by brewing a few healing potions for the local townsfolk? Cures for the common cold? The occasional *love potion*? That's simply a front to deflect suspicion – my real business is

selling poisons. Although, traveling into town to set up my stall is becoming such a pain as I get older…"

As she saw Eliza staring at her blankly, her mind still trying to process this new information, Alma continued, "But this is neither here nor there." She shuffled across the laboratory and reviewed a row of vials along one wall – each one labeled with a small scroll of paper. "What we need to focus on right now is what type of poison would work best with your new weapons. You may also need to develop something unique to help hunt the stag. You will need to experiment, of course. We can't be certain what resistances other travelers or animals might have."

"H-how should I experiment exactly?" Eliza asked, recalling her encounter with the players with a grimace. She didn't relish the idea of dying over and over again until she figured out the most effective combination of poisons.

Alma smiled at her nervous expression, anticipating her concern. "There's no need to engage in combat to test out your latest concoctions. As I said, I am not one for direct conflict myself. That's why we have these little beasties…"

As she finished speaking, Alma tugged at a tarp resting near the back of the laboratory, revealing neat rows of cages lining most of the wall. Inside were what appeared to be normal rabbits, their fur a motley collection of whites, browns, and grays. They shuffled hesitantly in their cages, eyeing Alma and Eliza with placid expressions.

"The rabbits around town are typically considered level 1 creatures," Alma explained. "The travelers rarely spare them any attention – likely because they provide little experience. However, as test subjects, they're excellent. They breed quickly and don't have any natural resistance to toxins. So, you can determine a poison's full effect."

"Doesn't that seem… cruel?" Eliza asked, staring at the rabbits.

Alma nodded in understanding. "Perhaps? But all animals fight for their survival – including humans. A sadist kills for sick enjoyment. We do this because we need to in order to survive and flourish. How is that different from a dragon that eats its prey… or a bear that attacks a player to defend its territory?"

The older woman met Eliza's gaze evenly. "Or players that would kill you out of greed?" Alma's eyes clouded over, and her gaze drifted to a corner of the room. "Sometimes we must make hard decisions to move forward and to protect ourselves – and sometimes those decisions require some collateral damage. In this case, you should be happy that only a few rabbits will need to die. You may have to face decisions in the future with far more dire consequences."

Alma drifted into silence, clearly lost in her own thoughts. Eliza could only wonder what had happened in the woman's past to warrant such a sorrowful expression. Although, with the hints she had dropped regarding her background, Eliza suspected that Alma likely had many regrets. A person didn't specialize in brewing poisons unless they intended to kill with them.

"So where should we get started?" Eliza asked, trying to dispel the heavy silence that now hung over the room.

Alma shook herself and glanced at Eliza. "Do you still have any of the ingredients that you used against the troll?"

Eliza nodded quickly and moved to an empty table in the center of the room, dumping the contents of her pack on the clear surface. There was an assortment of Caracas Leaf seeds, Mentril Root, and Caper Bark. Alma inspected the ingredients carefully, murmuring to herself. "Good, good. This is a fantastic start – you retained the information in those other textbooks well."

Alma turned to Eliza. "I would start with the seeds from the Caracas Leaf. As you are no doubt aware, the leaves are innocuous – causing only mild itching. However, the seeds are special. Properly distilled, they can create a fine oil with paralytic properties."

"How long would it last?" Eliza asked, her thoughts racing as she considered the possible applications of a paralyzing poison. That would have been incredibly useful with the bear. If she had been able to freeze the creature in place, she could have taken him out with a few well-placed *Ice Bolts*.

"It depends on the concentration and quantity, but it is typically only a few minutes at most – less depending on the creature's size, metabolism, and the method of transference." Alma smiled slightly. "As I said, illusions are helpful for this. You can typically have a creature ingest the poison directly – although your mist method may be more effective in a direct conflict."

"What about the Mentril Root and Caper Bark?" Eliza asked, nodding along with Alma's explanation.

"The root typically creates a wasting sickness. In large enough doses, it can cause death. The bark is often used to create a mild insecticide – which is useful for farmers but less helpful in our present situation. Some poisons and ingredients are only effective against certain types of animals and creatures.

So, it's similar to our world, Eliza thought, recalling the many biology and chemistry textbooks that her parents had forced her study.

"Of course, there are also many combinations of ingredients that can create new, more poisonous variants," Alma continued. "You can also include animal parts such as blood, bone, flesh, and organs

into the concoction to add additional effects – although those materials are much more difficult to come by."

Alma turned to Eliza, an excited gleam in her eye. "There are alchemists that spend their entire lives studying poisons and recording the different combinations and effects. The possibilities are nearly endless – as you no doubt witnessed firsthand with the poison you brewed to slay the troll."

Alma's enthusiasm was infectious, and Eliza couldn't help but feel her heart race as she glanced around the lab with fresh eyes – noting the dozens of vials that lined the shelves along the wall. She was beginning to realize that she had just barely scratched the surface of her *Alchemy* and *Poison* skills, with Alma essentially only covering the basics.

Her real-world studies had always felt dry and dull. She was just memorizing the work done by others – with little room on the horizon for invention. What was the fun of being an explorer when almost everything had already been mapped out by a dozen generations of scientists and any new invention required access to a full-fledged pharmaceutical laboratory? Yet here she could invent something entirely new.

The thought was intriguing, and Eliza was already itching to get started, her eyes glancing at the herbs lying on the table in the center of the room. The possibilities were limitless. She just couldn't decide what she wanted to create first.

Chapter 15 - Experimental

Eliza had spent the rest of the day and the entire night in-game in Alma's secret lab. The hours had passed quickly as she practiced different distillation methods and combinations of basic poisonous ingredients, mixing and matching concentrations and various catalysts to assess their effects on the rabbits.

The results had been astounding. She has found toxins that completely or partially paralyzed the small creatures, slowed their movements, caused wasting damage over time, and reduced their base statistics. The combinations were nearly endless, and, if it weren't for the morning sun peaking over the horizon and streaming in through the laboratory's windows, she might have kept going for the rest of the day.

However, there was also a limit to what she could accomplish in the lab. The rabbits weren't terrible test subjects, but she wasn't certain how some of the poisons would translate to a much larger creature – such as a bear or an adult human. She would also need to assess how the poisons would perform in combat. At her current skill level, some of the toxins weren't capable of killing even the level 1 rabbits, much less something more resilient. She would likely need to use her *Ice Bolt* and *Cold Grasp* to compensate.

Which explained why Eliza was now walking carefully through the forest, having spent the last hour navigating the hunting trail leading away from Alma's compound. The trees now towered above her, the whisper of a breeze gently rustling the leaves overhead as insects chirped happily nearby.

The walk would have almost been picturesque if Eliza wasn't planning to painfully poison and then kill an innocent forest creature. Well, not completely *innocent*, she corrected herself. The last bear had tried to kill her, after all.

With that macabre thought, Eliza decided to take a quick break. She ducked down next to a tree, carefully scanning the area around herself before opening her pack. She had learned her lesson with the bear and the players – determined not to be caught unprepared again. She had also left most of her money and valuable equipment at Alma's compound just in case, taking only a few of her poisons. If another player looted her corpse, they were likely in for a startling surprise when they found dozens of novice vials filled with various poisons.

Speaking of which, she quickly decided she should inventory her supplies. She was beginning to get close to the same place where

she had encountered the bear a few days before. Lifting the lid of her pack, she peeked inside and identified the handful of new poisons she had created.

Paralyzing Poison
This concoction was created by a novice alchemist with the help of an instructor. While the toxin does not cause any immediate harm to the recipient, it will paralyze them for a short time.
Quality: C
Damage: NA
Effects: Paralysis for 30 seconds.
Durability: 1/1

Wasting Poison
This concoction was created by a novice alchemist with the help of an instructor. This poison applies a damage over time effect to the target, causing them to suffer damage each second for the duration of the poison.
Quality: C
Damage: 20/second for 10 seconds.
Effects: NA
Durability: 1/1

Numbing Poison
This concoction was created by a novice alchemist with the help of an instructor. This poison weakens a target, reducing its statistics and damage for a time.
Quality: C
Damage: NA
Effects: 10% reduction to target's statistics for 60 seconds.
Durability: 1/1

Her current poisons weren't a marvel by any stretch of the imagination, but they were far better than her initial attempts the night before. For example, she had barely managed to get the paralysis duration over five seconds on her first few tries. It had taken her nearly an hour to figure out that she needed to grind the seeds more finely before distilling the oil. She had been kicking herself on that one once she'd figured it out.

The silver lining was that her crafting abilities had increased considerably – which no doubt had something to do with the hours she had spent reading in-game textbooks and experimenting in the laboratory. She was nowhere near Alma's level of skill yet, but she was still happy with her progress.

x3 Skill Rank Up: Poisons
Skill Level: Beginner Level 4
Effect: 2.5% chance to add a second random poison effect.

x1 Skill Rank Up: Herbalism
Skill Level: Beginner Level 9
Effect: Allows the player to harvest more difficult or dangerous plants. 4.5% chance for double ingredients.

x2 Skill Rank Up: Alchemy
Skill Level: Intermediate Level 1
Effect 1: Increases success chance of crafting potions and potion potency by 11%.
Effect 2: Reduces ingredient consumption by 1%.

With a sigh, Eliza pulled up her map. She could see that she was now a decent distance from Alma's compound and maybe thirty minutes from where she had encountered the Grizzly Bear. She had intentionally avoided heading south to the lake where she had discovered the Silver Stag. She didn't yet have her wands or any way to kill the stag, so it seemed rather pointless to confront any other players that might be hunting the beast.

However, she was still in a dangerous area, and she needed to be cautious. Eliza pulled out a Dexterity Potion that she had brewed the night before and kept the bottle in hand. She would need the extra speed and stealth that the potion afforded if she encountered a creature. To err on the side of caution, she also placed a vial containing the Paralyzing Poison in her pocket where it was within easy reach.

With her preparations in place, Eliza pulled herself to her feet and continued down the path. She walked slowly, keeping a tree beside her at all times and scanning the area further down the path before she proceeded. As she turned a bend in the road, she caught sight of the bushes moving ahead. Eliza immediately pressed herself against a tree, downing the Dexterity Potion in a single gulp and trying her best to keep out of sight.

A moment later, a large grizzly stumbled out of the bushes about 20 yards ahead of her position, the animal snorting and huffing softly as it searched the forest floor. Eliza breathed a sigh of relief when she realized the creature hadn't detected her – at least not yet. This was a perfect opportunity to test her poisons.

Moving quickly, she crouched beside the tree, placing her

Paralyzing Poison on the ground and unstoppering the vial carefully. Her heart was racing, and her fingers trembled slightly as she fiddled with the simple cork lid. She forced herself to take a deep breath, which helped calm her nerves – if only slightly.

It's just a game, she reminded herself. *You'll be fine. Even if the bear decides to tear open your throat and make a snack of your cooling corpse.*

Okay, that wasn't helping. Maybe she should just focus on her preparations.

With the poison ready, Eliza began to cast *Obscuring Mist*. Her fingers twined through the gestures of the spell as she whispered the requisite words, trying to keep her voice as low as possible. The bear's ears twitched slightly, but it gave no other sign that it had detected her presence as a globe of water began to coalesce in front of the mage.

As soon as the orb stabilized, Eliza grabbed the poison and sprinkled its contents over the orb, the yellow substance slowly staining the sphere of water. Alma had said she only needed to use a few drops for smaller creatures, but the bear was huge. After emptying half of the vial onto the orb, Eliza glanced at the bear one last time, noting the way its bulk shifted as it lumbered across the forest floor.

Nope, we're going all in, she abruptly decided, draining the remainder of the vial of poison as the orb before her began to glow a brilliant yellow.

She moved to set down the now empty bottle and missed her mark, the glass vessel tinkling gently as it scraped against the base of the tree beside her. Eliza immediately glanced up and saw the bear was staring in her direction, a low growl vibrating its throat.

Shit, shit, shit, she thought.

As the bear began moving toward her, its lumbering paws gouging at the dirt and vegetation of the forest floor, Eliza desperately tried to complete her *Obscuring Mist* spell. Her fingers fumbled through the final gestures a few times as she watched the bear closing in, sniffing at the air in great huffing snorts. It was nearly upon her now.

The bear caught sight of her only a moment later, its eyes filled with deadly intent and a roar erupting from its throat as it barreled toward her position. At the same time, she finished casting the spell. The orb in front of Eliza exploded outward in an expanding golden mist that curled and coiled around her frame and billowed out toward the bear. Focusing as best she could, Eliza tried to direct the tendrils of moisture – ordering her mist to encircle the bear's head.

The vapor responded sluggishly, moving much too slowly for her comfort as she saw the bear charging the last few yards toward her position. As the beast entered the yellow fog, it billowed and

swirled around the bear. The creature huffed slightly, the vapor sucked in through its nose. The poison didn't seem to have any immediate effect and Eliza stumbled back, terror settling heavily in her stomach. Her eyes darting around as she looked for somewhere to run – anywhere that might offer some protection.

She didn't have enough time.

The creature continued its headlong charge – only a few feet away now and its paws thundering against the ground. Eliza closed her eyes, her heart beating frantically as she accepted her fate. This had been a stupid, stupid idea.

A few seconds passed and... nothing happened. Eliza opened a single eye tentatively – half expecting to see the ephemeral blue motes of energy that signaled the game's deathscape. Instead, she was still very much alive. The bear had fallen on its side, its chest heaving feebly, and its eyes focused straight ahead.

A furtive glance at her combat screen confirmed that the bear was now afflicted with a paralysis debuff, and a small timer was counting down in her peripheral vision – indicating that she had sixty seconds until the paralysis wore off.

"Oh, thank god," Eliza murmured with a relieved sigh.

However, the next question lingered in her mind – now what?

This was an experiment, wasn't it? Maybe she should move closer and observe the effects of the poison. She took a furtive step toward the bear, her mist drifting out of the way to make room for her as she examined the creature carefully. The paralysis had taken longer to take hold than with the rabbits. Maybe it was a product of the bear's slower metabolism, its weight, or the delivery method? She had often fed the rabbits pellets drenched in poison instead of using the mist.

The duration was also longer than she expected. That might be due to the dosage. So maybe the poison's tooltip calculated the duration based on an "appropriate" dosage – which could vary wildly from creature to creature? That wasn't really helpful, but she could live with it now that she knew that the tooltip was inaccurate.

As she inspected the bear and stepped around its prone body, she also noticed that it was unable to move its eyes. Although, it seemed to be aware that she was there because its breathing quickened slightly as she neared. As she looked on, the bear's paw twitched, spasming slightly and causing Eliza to jump back in surprise.

The paralysis must wear off gradually, she thought, claws of fear clenching at her stomach.

A glance at the debuff timer confirmed that she was running out of time. She needed to end this quickly. Eliza spared a glance back down at the bear as she began to cast *Ice Bolt*, the creature's pitiful

wheezing audible over the thrumming energy of her spell. She couldn't help but feel a little bad about this – yet Alma's words echoed in her head. She had no doubt that the bear would have torn her apart if she hadn't paralyzed the creature.

This was just the way of this world.

Then she embedded the spear of ice into the creature's eye, blood spurting from the wound. Eliza immediately followed up with another rapid-fire series of bolts, knowing from recent experience that the single attack wouldn't be sufficient. With clinical precision, icy spikes punctured each of the bear's weak points, its lifeblood leaking out onto the ground and staining the forest floor crimson.

Just as the timer was about to expire and the bear's limbs began to twitch more erratically, Eliza cast a final missile – ending the helpless bear's life. Eliza stepped back, her water mana still coursing through her veins as she surveyed her opponent. Golden mist hung around her like a deadly halo, creating a single clear patch of ground around the bear's corpse and Eliza.

She could feel guilt coil in her stomach as she stared down at the bear.

However, Eliza tamped down on the feeling, her water mana helping with that process. When the chill energy pulsed through her veins, it felt easier to accept the things she needed to do – even if she would normally have been wringing her hands right now. Her thoughts felt almost… clinical as she observed the bear's body, noting that it had taken nearly five well-placed bolts to end its life.

This had been necessary. She had confirmed that her poisons would work – even against larger or higher-level opponents. When her new wands were complete, she might even be able to handle other players. The only problem was the Silver Stag. She had no idea how she was going to tackle that creature, but she could already visualize the Hippie's mocking expression if she showed up empty-handed.

At this point, she didn't want to give the irritating god the pleasure of seeing her fail.

Chapter 16 - Malignant

Eliza was sitting at the edge of a small glade, her thoughts gloomy. After slaying the bear, she had wandered the forest a bit to give herself some time to think. She had a problem. Even with the improvements to *Obscuring Mist* and her new wands, she suspected that she was going to face a challenge with the Silver Stag.

She had kept mentally reviewing the battle she had witnessed between the creature and the band of players – the scene repeating on an endless loop. The difficulty was that the Silver Stag was just too damned fast. Even the bear had been a problem, with her poison barely taking hold before it made it through her mist. What would she do with the deer? The creature had moved so quickly, she hadn't even been able to follow it with her eyes.

Sneaking up on the deer seemed like a possibility. A quick online search revealed that a few people had unlocked the *Sneak* skill – which she assumed was how the group of players had managed to get so close to the Silver Stag before alerting the creature to their presence. However, as the incident with both the bear and the players had demonstrated, her stealth abilities left something to be desired.

Eliza's brow furrowed in thought. She could linger around the edge of the lake until the Silver Stag showed up again and then try to cast her *Obscuring Mist* from a distance. That *might* work, assuming the creature lingered in the mist. However, she really hadn't tested the range on the spell.

Curious, Eliza's hands began twining through the gestures of *Obscuring Mist* – a ball of moisture forming in front of her and then exploding outward in an expanding wave of fog. She mentally directed the mist to travel to the other side of the glade. It complied slowly, the haze of moisture creeping forward along the ground. However, it only made it about halfway across the open area before stopping short, the fog beginning to thin and dissipate.

"Damn it," Eliza murmured. The range seemed to be about ten yards. That wasn't bad, but it meant she would have to get close to the stag – very close.

x1 Spell Rank Up: Obscuring Mist
Skill Level: Beginner Level 5
Effect: Increased range and fog density by 5%.

Eliza sighed as she reviewed the spell rank-up notification. She hadn't really focused on the notification before, but it clearly indicated that the range would increase as she kept casting. However, it was only a 1% increase – which meant that she would need to practice a lot to dramatically increase her range. She couldn't afford to wait that long or the other players might manage to slay the stag before her.

She needed to try another tactic.

Eliza stood abruptly and began pacing around a tree. Okay, so ranged missiles were out. There was no way she could hit the stag with *Ice Bolt* since her aim was terrible. Unless the creature was on the ground or incapacitated like the troll, she didn't have much faith in her abilities. Besides, the stag was unbelievably fast – she wasn't even going to try. *Obscuring Mist*'s range was also too short to sneak up on the creature.

That only left *Cold Grasp*.

A frown creased her lips. With a few gestures, she tried casting the spell on the forest floor. A glowing azure ring formed on the ground, and, as she completed the spell, spikes of ice abruptly shot into the air. Some experimentation showed that she could cast the ring rather far away – at least twenty yards by her estimate. That might work…

"Except for the glowing blue circle on the ground," she muttered. The spell took at least four seconds to cast, and she doubted that the Silver Stag would hang around to figure out what the azure ring did. Like most creatures, she was guessing that the deer would be a bit suspicious of an ominously glowing circle.

What she really needed was a trap.

She hesitated at that thought. That actually might work. If she had something that she could cast and then conceal, that would remove her range problem, and she wouldn't need to be sneaky. She could just set up the trap and then walk away to a safe distance and wait – preferably hidden behind something solid.

Eliza's gaze shifted to the ice spikes that were slowly melting in the warm sunlight that streamed down around the glade. Was there a way that she could delay *Cold Grasp* so that it didn't trigger immediately? She had accomplished something similar with *Obscuring Mist* – which must mean that the game's spells were somewhat malleable.

She supposed the only way to find out was to experiment.

With at least the semblance of a plan, Eliza began casting *Cold Grasp* again and again along the forest floor. After nearly an hour, she slumped back against a tree in defeat. The glade was now riddled with icy spikes, the lances glinting in the sunlight. It looked like some sort

of angry, frigid god had decided he hated this small clearing in particular.

"Damn it," Eliza muttered in frustration.

"Oh, what a beautiful sight," a voice spoke up from beside her. Eliza did her best not to let out a frustrated sigh as the Hippie came into sight, Fluffy trotting out from behind a nearby tree. The sheep immediately walked up to an icy lance and began licking its surface.

The god hesitated for a moment as he surveyed the frozen glade before glancing at Eliza. "Actually, it seems sort of dangerous to just leave all these sharp things lying around. Someone could get hurt!"

Eliza stared at him incredulously. "Are you seriously lecturing me about responsibility?" she asked in irritation. "You?"

The god put a hand to his chest in mock offense. "I would never…," he began before hesitating. "Huh, actually, you know what? I am pretty irresponsible when it comes to leaving things lying about. This one time, I left Fluffy in a hydra's den…"

This earned him a huff from the sheep, who had stopped licking the ice to glare at the mad god. "See! Fluffy still won't let it go. It was just the one time!

"Anyway," the god said, trying to change the subject as Fluffy continued to side-eye him. "What are we up to here? Picking up ice sculpting as a new hobby?"

"Not exactly," Eliza muttered. "I was trying to figure out how to complete your stupid quest. You sort of forgot to mention that the Silver Stag is super-fast – or that it was being hunted by most of the players in this area." She had meant to deck the god for omitting those details, but, now, in the moment, she just felt tired and irritable.

"Huh, that does sound familiar," the Hippie said. "So… erm… are we now trying to attract the deer with ice lances. I mean, they're pretty and all…"

"No," Eliza snapped, rubbing at her temple with one hand. "I was trying to use *Cold Grasp* as a type of trap. You know, cast it on the ground, but delay the spikes from appearing until someone steps onto the circle." She waved a hand at the ice-covered glade. "As you can see, I haven't figured it out yet."

"Oh, that's really easy," the god said in an animated voice. "Here, let me show." With a snap of his fingers, a huge circular ring appeared in the glade, stretching nearly ten feet across. As several seconds ticked by, the spell didn't trigger, and the glowing outline began to fade to a more muted dark blue line.

Fluffy approached the circle with tentative steps, sniffing at it curiously. Then he reached out a hoof, barely scratching the edge of the circle. A massive crescendo of ice spikes suddenly erupted from the ground, shattering Eliza's puny little spears and towering nearly

ten feet above the glade. A spike had also sliced through the air near Fluffy face, sheering off the hair around his eyes and making it look like he now had bangs.

The sheep turned slowly to look at the Hippie, deadly intent in its eyes. “That’s not a bad look on you Fluffy!” The hippie commented, tapping his lips with a finger. “It gives you a hipster sort of vibe. Now we just need some glasses…” As he trailed off, the god materialized a pair of sunglasses out of thin air and began chasing the sheep around the edge of the glade, trying his best to put them on Fluffy’s face.

Eliza ignored the god’s antics, staring open-mouthed at the glade. “That seems like overkill,” she said to herself, but at least it demonstrated that her plan was *possible*.

“Hmm, yeah,” the Hippie murmured, stopping abruptly and staring at the field. “I might have overdone it a bit. But it *is* super easy.”

“Maybe for a god…” Eliza muttered. Then she hesitated. Hadn’t the Hippie taught her how to cast the other spells. Why couldn’t he teach her how to modify the *Cold Grasp* spell the same way? The only trouble would be convincing the irritating man.

“Can you teach me that variation of the spell,” Eliza ventured tentatively, gesturing at the glade.

The Hippie frowned, tapping at his lips with his fingers once again. “I could… but that seems like cheating. Don’t you want to feel the flush of victory when you figure it out yourself?”

“No, not really,” Eliza replied evenly. “Plus, you never gave me a reward for finishing that first quest…”

“What about all of that loot! Those piles of misappropriated goodies should have been enough!” the Hippie exclaimed.

“You mean the loot I would have earned by killing the troll anyway,” Eliza said in a dry tone. “That isn’t a quest reward. Besides, you owe me anyway. You also lied to me about the deer, remember?”

The god seemed a bit put off by this retort. Well, I didn’t technically lie…” he stopped speaking when he saw Eliza glaring at him. Even Fluffy was slowly shaking his head. “Fine. Fine. You can have your spell as a reward, but this is the last handout! People just won’t learn to take care of themselves if you coddle them.”

“I’m not sure I need to worry about you *coddling* me,” Eliza replied in an exhausted voice.

The Hippie snorted in disagreement as he approached her and rested a finger to her temple. A tendril of azure energy wound around his digit before eeking through Eliza’s skin. Immediately, she knew the requisite words and gestures to modify Cold Grasp – as though she had memorized the spell long ago.

Cold Grasp Alternate Effect Unlocked

At the cost of additional mana and casting time, *Cold Grasp* can be converted into a trap spell. Any movement inside the magic circle will trigger the trap. Use with caution!

"I would have figured this out on my own?" Eliza asked in irritation. "This completely modifies the incantation, gestures, and the mana cost. This is basically a different spell entirely."

"Well, with time…" the Hippie began, looking a little embarrassed.

"You mean like a decade of experimentation?" Eliza interrupted.

"Ungrateful…," the god muttered under his breath, glancing off to the side.

Eliza glared at the Hippie. "What was that?"

"Nothing. Nothing. Now that you have your reward, I guess we'll be off." With a snap of his fingers, the Hippie and Fluffy abruptly disappeared. Eliza could only stand there for a few moments fuming as she looked at the spot the irritating man had occupied only a moment before. Did other players have to put up with this nonsense?

She took a deep breath, trying to refocus her attention. Now that she had managed to obtain the modified spell, she needed to test it. She began casting the spell on the ground nearby and then hesitated as a thought occurred to her. Instead of completing the spell, she stopped it halfway – the glowing blue ring just beginning to appear but not fully resolving yet. Then she stepped forward and placed a single poison vial in the center of the circle before completing the spell.

A moment later, the ring solidified, and the glow disappeared, the outline almost impossible to see. Her small green poison vial still lingered in the center, the color of the vial blending in the with the leaves and grass scattered about the forest floor. Apparently, it didn't trigger the trap if she placed something inside the ring before the spell completed.

Acting cautiously, Eliza picked up a rock and gently tossed it into the circle. The lances of ice immediately erupted from the ground, shattering the vial of poison. The ice was covered in the sticky green substance, and the liquid dripped down the frigid spears.

"Huh, that might work…" Eliza said, her thoughts racing.

If she could combine the Wasting Poison with this new variant of *Cold Grasp*, then any creature that stepped on the circle would be

struck by the ice shards – which would also act as a vector for the poison. Between the trap and the damage over time effect of the poison, this might be sufficient to kill larger creatures. At least, she was hoping that her quick mental calculations were accurate.

There was only one way to test her strategy. Eliza glanced into her pack and saw the dozens of green vials she had prepared the night before. They ranged considerably in damage – with some being on the weaker side. But there should still be plenty of poison to test her new traps. The only problem was going to be remembering where she had set the traps so that she could come back and check on them later. After some experimenting with her map, she soon discovered that she could place markers where she set each of the circles.

With a shrug, Eliza got to work. She didn't have long until she would need to log off and she had quite a few traps to set. She would be able to come back tomorrow to check on her circles. Her hope was that she would snag a bear or two. Although, she suspected she would probably return to find only empty traps.

But it wasn't like she had a better plan.

Chapter 17 - Anti-Social

Eliza was sitting in class, her fingers drumming against the surface of her desk, the sound making a staccato drumbeat against the fake wood. Their teacher droned in the background, his face projected on a screen that hovered near the front of the classroom as a series of images were scrolled across the nearby margin – the graphics showing basic cellular reproductive cycles.

She could see that her classmates were at least as bored as she was, a few sneaking peeks at their Cores under their desk or distractedly taking notes or doodling. Eliza wasn't sure she saw the point of typical high school classrooms in this day and age. Most public schools lacked the resources to assign a teacher to each classroom, and so the staff remotely taught several classes at once – the teachers stationed at a central school building or working from home.

The result was a perpetual dumbing down of the material. How could a single teacher answer questions for a few hundred students or reasonably convey that information? This was exactly why her parents forced her into after-school preparatory classes. Usually, the class sizes were much smaller, and the teachers had more training and experience.

Eliza's thoughts were interrupted as a faint chime sounded through the classroom, and the surface of her desk rippled and contorted, a quiz question projected across the table. It looked like a simple question about mitosis, and her finger tapped the right answer automatically. She hadn't really been listening to the lecture, but biology was part of her extracurricular courses, and she had the elementary stuff down cold.

I thought this was supposed to be a college-level class, she thought tiredly. She just needed to suffer through. She only had a few more months until graduation.

"Hmm, I can see that a number of you aren't getting the material," the instructor said, a frown plastered across his face as he reviewed the incoming quiz results. Eliza looked up at the screen and saw that nearly 60% of the class had answered the question incorrectly. She couldn't help but glance at her classmates with an incredulous expression.

"Class A23," the instructor said, tapping at his console. A small light on the camera at the front of the classroom flickered to life. "Robert, could you please describe the five phases of mitosis for the

class. The camera focused on a student sitting beside Eliza, his face suddenly filling the screen.

Robert flushed under the sudden scrutiny, his face practically glowing as he realized he was being put on the spot in front of hundreds of other students. “Umm. Prophase, promeaphase… err… meta…” he trailed off, looking confused.

“Hmm, I can see that you didn’t do the reading last night,” the instructor said with a frown. Eliza heard a small ding, and a “-10” appeared on Robert’s desk, indicating that the instructor had reduced his score for that class period – on top of the fact that he must have gotten the quiz question wrong.

“Okay, let’s try this again,” the instructor continued, rubbing at his eyes tiredly. The screen shifted, and now Eliza’s face was on the screen, blinking owlishly and adjusting her glasses self-consciously as she realized she was in the hot seat. “Same question. Name the five phases of mitosis.”

Eliza had no wish to have her face projected on screen any longer than it needed to be, and she murmured the answer quickly, her eyes focused on her desk. “Prophase, prometaphase, metaphase, anaphase, and telophase.”

“Correct! Good job,” the teacher said, before moving on to the lecture. “Now let’s talk about common mutations that frequently appear during cellular reproduction. This can result in something referred to as microevolution…”

Eliza’s attention was focused on her desk, keeping her eyes down. A small gold star appeared on the screen, signaling that she had earned some bonus credit for answering a question on the spot. Yet she also didn’t miss the glare that Robert gave her or the muttering of the girls behind her.

Great.

She had answered the question to get out of the spotlight, only to irritate her classmates by showing them up. Not for the first time, she wondered why her parents even made her go to class instead of handling her schoolwork from home. She vaguely remembered them yammering on about the need for socialization – although Eliza had long ago resigned herself to the fact that she absolutely sucked at talking to other people.

With a sigh, she went back to what she did best – keeping her head down and avoiding attention. She made it through the rest of the day that way, occasionally snapping to attention to answer a quiz question, but mostly just letting her thoughts wander. They naturally ended up on AO. She was curious to see how well her traps were performing in-game, and she expected that Evan would be finished with her new weapons soon. Maybe she could head into Falcon’s Hook

when she got back in-game to check on the engineer's progress before venturing back out to the forest to check on her traps.

A bell interrupted her wandering thoughts once more, and Eliza glanced at the clock. She just had PE and then she was done – she could go home until she had to repeat this tedious experience again tomorrow. She grabbed her bag and headed for the door with the other students, quickly making her way to the other side of campus. Dozens of other teenagers made a similar trek, although they spoke loudly and joked with each other.

Eliza just kept her head down, changing uncomfortably into her gym clothes and then heading for the track field. PE was one of the few classes that actually required in-person supervision – although she had heard that some schools now handled the process with drones. As a result, their PE instructor was already in the field when her students arrived.

The woman barely acknowledged the teenagers as they approached, looking up from her Core for only a brief moment and waving a hand at the circular track. "Today we're going to run some laps… or just walk if that's too painful for you. You just need to make the circuit ten times," she explained and then immediately turned her attention back to the small screen hovering above her wrist.

Eliza sighed. *Thank god for public education. With this sort of enthusiasm, it's no wonder that this school is performing so poorly in the city rankings.*

There was nothing she could do about it, however – except trudge around the circular track with the other students. A few teens decided to be proactive and actually worked up the energy to run, but the vast majority simply broke up into smaller groups and chatted with their friends while they made their laps.

As usual, Eliza trudged along by herself. After the second lap, she began getting bored. There was only so much pointless nonsense a person could take during the course of the day, and she was hitting her limit. Actually, that was a lie. She had passed her limit hours ago.

"I'm already level fifty," one of the girls ahead of Eliza bragged to her friend. "I went with earth magic and archery. I can bind a target and then pick them off from a distance. It makes farming pretty easy."

"Not a bad strategy," one of the guys beside her replied with a nod. "I tried the fighter route for a while, but the melee combat in AO is a little… ridiculous? Who wants to fight a dragon face to face? I mean, it sounds cool on paper, but in reality, it's insane. I end up using my fire magic more than I swing my sword now."

"What? Poor little Joshy can't handle getting stabbed?" the first girl teased with a smile.

"You know I don't swing that way, Rebecca," he replied with a laugh.

"Where are you guys playing now?" another guy asked. "I've been staying close to Vaerwald since I'm a mage class, but the leveling is difficult. There are just too many players around the mage city, and the fields are usually picked clean."

"The game started me along the eastern coast," Josh explained. "It took some time to get my old guildmates together, but we've set up shop near Falcon's Hook."

Eliza's eyes widened slightly in surprise. She hadn't realized that some of her classmates were in the same area as her. From what she had read online, Falcon's Hook was a bit of a backwater compared to most of the in-game cities.

"How are the mobs in that area?" Rebecca asked.

Josh winced slightly. "Not bad if you have a group. We usually hunt wolf packs in the nearby forest. You just have to keep an eye out for the bears. It usually takes a couple of players to take one down. I think the game treats them like some sort of elite creature."

"Yeah, I notice that the difficulty spikes weirdly. It doesn't seem to be based entirely on the creature's level," Rebeca added. "Like I can take out the imps around Vaerwald without any trouble, but then there'll just be a golem out of nowhere that wrecks me." The rest of the group nodded in agreement.

Eliza couldn't help but frown as she listened to their conversation. The bears were tough, but did they normally require a group of players? That couldn't be right. Granted Eliza had only managed to take out the first one by climbing a tree and using potions. The second one had also just sort of keeled over and let her wail on it with her *Ice Bolt*, but it seemed possible to solo one if you used some sort of crowd control ability first – like her poison.

"One of the guys in my guild claims he farms out in the forest solo, but I think he's like level 60 already," Josh continued, shaking his head. "If it weren't for the forced logouts, he probably would have starved to death already. I'm not sure it's really possible for the rest of us scrubs."

"I-I've killed a bear solo," Eliza said, speaking up shyly from behind the group. The other teenagers glanced back at her, incredulous expressions lingering on their faces. "I'm actually in Falcon's Hook too."

Josh snorted. "No way. What class?"

"Umm, water mage," Eliza said quietly.

"That's just BS then," Rebecca said matter-of-factly. "Even with higher-level ice spells, that would be a struggle and the cast times are ridiculous. That's why most water mages go healing or need a tank for

support."

Josh shrugged. "I dunno. She might have managed to one shot it from a distance. What level are you?" he asked, directing his question at Eliza.

"Level 27, I think," she said quietly.

Josh just stared at her for a long moment. "Nevermind. I'm going to have to go with Rebecca on this one. That sounds impossible. You're barely higher than the lower-level bears near the edge of the forest. Maybe another player had already injured it?"

Eliza bit her lip, not sure if she really wanted to explain that she had actually climbed a tree while running for her life. Or that she had poisoned the second bear. If they already didn't believe her, then she expected that they might think she was crazy with that sort of explanation.

"See? Look at her face. I told you she was making it up," Rebecca said, interpreting Eliza's hesitation as a sign that she was lying. "Why don't we take a seat in the shade? The teacher isn't even watching us." The other students nodded, and they started walking toward the bleachers standing along the side of the field.

"I'm not…" Eliza began quietly, but the other students had already started walking away, and they didn't hear her.

A hollow weight settled in her stomach. She shouldn't be surprised that they didn't believe her. What was she thinking butting into their conversation? After the scene in class earlier, she should have known better than to open her mouth. It always seemed to end terribly.

Then she hesitated. Was she really in the wrong here, though? It wasn't her fault that her classmates couldn't solo the bears by themselves and she had now done it twice. She had also figured out how to weaponize her *Obscuring Mist* and brew poisons in-game. Sure, she wasn't as high a level as them, but she had come a long way!

Her irritation only continued to grow as she made her slow laps around the track. It was one thing for the other students to ignore or resent her – she was used to that. But no one could refute her performance in the classroom, and she took pride in that. That's probably why Rebecca's words stung so much, and why Eliza couldn't help but glare at the group of other students as she passed them each time.

She would show them. Once she had her new weapons, she planned to take out the Silver Stag and complete the Hippie's quest. Then no one would be able to question her abilities in-game.

Chapter 18 - Murderous

When Eliza finally made it home from school, she immediately ran up to her room and donned her headset. Moments later, she was standing in Alma's garden, sunlight streaming through the leaves of the multi-colored plants around her and droplets of dew hovering on their leaves. In contrast to the austere environment of her school and the harsh fluorescent lighting, the garden was refreshing – and a welcome relief. She felt more at peace here – more than anywhere else in her life.

However, her momentary respite was interrupted as a series of notifications appeared in front of her in an endless stream. Eliza's eyes widened as she surveyed the notices, her mind wheeling in confusion.

x12 Level Up!
You have (95) undistributed stat points.

x5 Skill Rank Up: Cold Grasp
Skill Level: Beginner Level 6
Effect 1: Increases radius by 6%

x3 Skill Rank Up: Poisons
Skill Level: Beginner Level 4
Effect: 4% chance to add a second random poison effect.

x1 Skill Rank Up: Herbalism
Skill Level: Beginner Level 10
Effect: Allows the player to harvest more difficult or dangerous plants. 5% chance for double ingredients.

x1 Skill Rank Up: Alchemy
Skill Level: Intermediate Level 2
Effect 1: Increases success chance of crafting potions and potion potency by 12%.
Effect 2: Reduces ingredient consumption by 2%.

"How is this possible?" she murmured to herself.

Eliza had no idea what to make of this. It had to be a mistake. How could she have leveled twelve times while logged out? Yet, as

her eyes skimmed the notifications, she also noticed how much her *Cold Grasp* spell had improved. Had her traps killed a bunch of creatures in the forest? That seemed like a possible explanation, although she was surprised that she had gotten credit for the kills while logged out at Alma's compound.

Maybe the distance didn't matter if they were her traps?

She shook her head. It did her no good to stand there in the garden guessing. She needed to follow through with her plan. She should go visit Evan and then check on her traps. That was the only way she was going to figure out what had happened.

Eliza started making her way toward Falcon's Hook, following the small trail leading away from Alma's cottage until it met up with the main road. As she neared town, the number of players on the road increased dramatically – with the usual crowd making the long trek back to town after hunting in the nearby forests.

Eliza usually kept her head down to avoid drawing attention, not making eye contact or sparing much attention to the other people around her. However, she couldn't help but notice that the players looked more disheveled than usual. Their armor was torn and bloodied, and their faces were haggard.

"Come on, Amanda," a player said from behind Eliza. "You need to hurry up so that we can regroup with Scott and Justin when they respawn and head back to the forest."

"What's the point?" the girl muttered dejectedly. "You saw that poor *excuse* for a battle. We had those four wolves cornered and then half our team just dies? What were those spikes that came out of the ground?"

Eliza could feel a hollow weight settle in her stomach as she listened to their conversation and she risked a furtive glance over her shoulder. Amanda was clearly a mage, her green robes torn and stained with blood. Her shoulders were drooped dejectedly as she trudged forward. The man beside her didn't look any better – his leather armor was ripped, and the sheath at his waist was empty.

"I don't know," he said. "I just don't know. I thought I saw some sort of debuff before they died. My combat log showed they were taking damage even after those spikes appeared, but it just says *unidentified damage* – whatever that means."

"This game was hard enough before our groupmates randomly died for no reason. Is this a bug or something?" the girl groused.

A few other players nearby were paying close attention to this conversation. A gruff older man, his face covered in a thick silver stubble, spoke up, "Wait, you guys lost some teammates to some sort of ice spikes?"

"Yeah," Amanda replied. "Took out two team members in

about 10 seconds. We barely managed to run away from the wolves…"

"The same thing happened to us," the man said with a frown and gestured at his teammates. "We're actually going back to town for the respawns too. I don't think it's a bug, though…" he murmured, trailing off in thought. "I've played for a while now, and I haven't noticed a single glitch or bug."

"Me either," another player chimed in. The conversation had now drawn the attention of most of the surrounding players and NPCs. "But we encountered the ice spikes too."

Eliza's heart was beating rapidly in her chest, and she couldn't help but shrink in on herself, studiously avoiding looking at any of the players around her and speeding up her pace slightly. She was starting to suspect that her newfound levels might have had a different source than just wild animals.

"So, what does this mean?" Amanda asked, her eyes widening as the conversation continued. "If it's not a bug, then what? There weren't random ice spikes a few days ago."

Her teammate ran a frustrated hand through his hair. "Well, there's one obvious answer. If it isn't a bug – and I'm not saying that isn't a possibility – then it could be another player or NPC."

"You know, the spikes did sort of resemble the *Cold Grasp* spell that water mages have," another player chimed in.

"Sure, but that spell doesn't usually apply a damage over time effect," the older man said, his voice sounding distracted. "Our teammates didn't die to the spikes, they died from the DOT. They were taking damage long after we got them free, we just didn't catch it in time. *Cold Grasp* also needs to be cast. We didn't find anyone in the nearby woods."

"Maybe one of the PK guilds figured out a clever way to hunt low-level players?" Amanda asked, bitterness tinging her voice. "I wouldn't put it past some of them."

"Except they didn't take any loot," her teammate offered in rebuttal. "What's the point of slaying a bunch of players if you don't collect their stuff? You'd be better off just hunting other creatures in that case – especially if they were skilled enough to come up with this type of spell."

"You're right. I don't get it," the older man said, shaking his head in confusion. His reaction was mirrored by the group of players near Eliza. "But one thing is for sure, we need to start being careful in the forest. Regardless of whoever or *whatever* is responsible, it's becoming really dangerous to try to level near town."

Eliza hastened her steps further at that point, putting some distance between herself and the players. Her mind was wheeling as

she tried to process their conversation. One thing was certain, it looked like she was responsible for killing quite a few players – even if it had been an accident. That hadn't been her goal at all, and she hadn't even thought about the other players when she had set the traps the day before. She had just wanted to test them on the forest creatures!

What would happen if the other players somehow discovered that she was responsible for the traps? The conversation she had just overheard had already hit a little too close to home. They had identified her *Cold Grasp* spell at least – which was to be expected. The spell was a pretty common choice for low-level water mages. Although, the fact that they hadn't been able to identify her poison was a positive. They also hadn't mentioned her name, so their combat log must not have populated that information.

That made her hesitate. She pulled up her own combat log and saw that the damage and deaths had been registered, but the creatures and players afflicted by her spells and poisons weren't identified. Maybe she needed to be within range to gain this information – the game system limiting her info to things that her character knew or that she had observed herself. If that were the case, it would be really difficult for the players to link the deaths to her.

The more Eliza thought through the problem, the more she began to relax. A worm of worry still wriggled in her stomach, but it didn't seem like the players would be able to start a witch hunt targeting her specifically. They might be on the lookout for water mages, though. At that thought, Eliza glanced down at herself, noting her faded tunic and trousers. She had barely upgraded from the beginner equipment, and the cloth was stained by the various ingredients she used in her potions.

I don't even really look like a mage, she thought to herself. At least, I'm not wearing the typical robes or using a staff. If she could figure out some way to hide her class and abilities further, that would be to her advantage. Plus, she had a cover for being in the forest since she needed ingredients for her potions and she had a good reputation in town. She might be able to avoid detection for a long time.

What am I saying? Eliza demanded of herself, stopping that line of thought short. *Am I really planning to keep laying traps?*

She couldn't help but recall how helpless she had felt at the hands of the PK'ers or the looks of frustrated anger on the other players' faces. She shook her head. She wouldn't really wish that on anyone. Yet, at the same time, the experience and skill increases she had gained were incredible. A not-insignificant part of her wanted to keep going.

Maybe I can just wait and talk to Evan. If I can retrieve my new

weapons and take out the stag, then I can go back to helping Alma, and I won't need to worry about any of this, she decided, her hands clenching into fists as the city's gates loomed in front of her.

With a tentative plan in place, Eliza focused on making her way through the town, taking a winding path through its chaotic streets until she found herself in front of the door to Evan's shop – the familiar worn shingle fluttering in the stiff ocean breeze that blew through the city's streets.

Eliza hesitantly stepped inside the gloomy little shop, immediately overwhelmed once more by the incessant, rhythmic tick of Evan's many clocks. The grizzled engineer was standing in his work area near the back of the shop, and he didn't bother to glance up as she approached.

"I'll be with you in a moment," Evan barked in a distracted voice while hunched over a strange-looking contraption on his workbench.

"N-no problem," Eliza replied shyly. "I'm just here to pick up my comission."

That immediately got the engineer's attention, and he glanced up, his eyes widening. "Ahh, Eliza! Nevermind, I've been waiting for you to show up for more than a day now. Let me go get your new beauties."

Evan rushed into the back room before Eliza could say anything in response, her mouth hanging open in surprise. The engineer returned only a moment later, carrying what appeared to be a cloth bundle. As Eliza looked on, he set the bundle on a table and unrolled it, revealing a row of wands attached to the interior.

"So, instead of a staff, I decided to go with something a little different," Evan said with a grand gesture, his mouth twisting into a broad smile. He picked up a single wand and handed it to her. It had a plain metallic base that gave off a faint sheen in the dull light of the shop, and a single colored band had been attached halfway up the hilt. The top of the wand was adorned with a milky white crystal. In many ways, it looked like an ordinary wand.

A quick inspection revealed the following:

Deathwind Wand V1.0
At a first glance, this wand appears rather normal. However, upon closer inspection, you notice that a clever mechanism has been installed in the interior of the shaft and the head of the wand can be removed. Additional testing and improvements may increase the efficiency and casting speed of the wand.
Quality: C
Damage: NA

Durability: 20/20
+5 Intelligence
+5 Willpower
+5% Casting Speed

"How does it work?" Eliza asked, curiosity lacing her voice.

"Here, let me show you," Evan said, picking up another wand – this one had a green band. "The base of the wand is actually hollow. You can pop the top by pressing this catch," he explained, thumbing a nearly invisible latch just underneath the crystal. The top of the wand promptly flipped open, revealing a small compartment.

"You can place a vial in this compartment. I have taken the liberty of creating a special cartridge just for these wands," Evan explained, pulling out a wooden container filled with small jars. He pulled one out and handed it to Eliza. "I designed the cartridge to hook into a crystal matrix built into the bottom of the wand and the top portion of the vial is covered with a semi-porous material."

"Okay…," Eliza said, flabbergasted by the man's rapid-fire explanation. "So what happens if I press this button on the side," she asked, pointing to a small crystal button near the base of the rod.

Evan' smile widened. "If a cartridge is loaded, that will ignite the air crystals along the bottom, causing a gust of air to push the vial's contents up and through the crystal. He flipped the top back down and showed Eliza the top of the wand. "I drilled small holes in the focusing crystal so that the substance would shoot out of the top."

Eliza's eyes widened in surprise. "If I'm understanding you correctly, I would basically shove the wand into the orb of water and then push this button on the side, and it would eject the contents into the sphere?"

"Exactly," the engineer said, nodding excitedly. "You can then put different cartridges in different wands. You will need to pre-load them of course, but I have color coded the wands so that you can keep track of which poisons are associated with each weapon."

"This… this is amazing," Eliza murmured as she inspected the wands. She hadn't even considered color-coding her wands or how she would keep each one straight.

"You haven't even tried them yet!" Evan exclaimed. "And I took the liberty of setting up a little demonstration." With that statement, the engineer circled around his worktable and quickly stepped toward the front door, throwing the lock into place.

Evan then headed back to Eliza and yanked away a tarp covering what she had initially assumed was a crate in the corner of his shop. Inside, Eliza could see a rabbit, its ears perking up and flicking back and forth as it surveyed the shop. "Here is your specimen

and you can load a vial with one of your own poisons."

Eliza was also curious to see the wands in operation, and she pulled a green vial from her bag, carefully pouring its contents into one of the new cartridges that Evan had designed. She then slotted the cartridge into a wand and snapped the crystal lid closed. With her preparations complete, Eliza squared off facing the cage – Evan hovering near her shoulder and bouncing slightly on his toes in his excitement.

"Here goes nothing," Eliza murmured.

Her free hand began to wind through the gesture of *Obscuring Mist*. The wand's crystal flared to life, sapphire energy swirling across its surface before forming a globe of water in front of Eliza. Instead of suspending the spell as she typically did, Eliza simply plunged the wand into the globe and depressed the button that Evan had indicated while continuing the spell. She felt the wand vibrate slightly and her poison was ejected from the end of the wand and into the sphere – quickly turning it an ominous emerald.

As the spell completed, the orb exploded in a cloud of dense green fog, and Eliza was already mentally ordering the mist to cover the rabbit's cage. A moment later, the animal was obscured from sight, and she heard a faint gurgling sound. As the spell began to dissipate, the rabbit came back into view, its corpse lying unmoving on its side.

"Ahh, now *that's* fascinating," Evan murmured from beside Eliza. He snatched at the wand and opened it to inspect the cartridge, noting that some of the poison hadn't been ejected properly. "I can still improve on the internal mechanism…" he muttered to himself and turned to his worktable to start scratching out some rough notes.

"It works fine for now," Eliza said before he completely forgot she was there. "Actually, this is kind of amazing. Thank you so much, Evan."

"No problem. The next version will be better, I promise," he said, waving a distracted hand at her. "You can take this batch in the meantime."

"Uh, do I owe you for the next group," Eliza asked cautiously, suddenly realizing that she didn't have any more loot to offer in payment. She wasn't looking forward to another trip to the troll's former den.

Evan turned to face her, his eyes meeting hers. "No, no. You paid more than enough to cover a few rounds of prototypes and cartridges. Plus, this project is fascinating."

Then the man hesitated, his mechanical arm whirring slightly as he fiddled with it with his free hand. "Speaking of which, Alma stopped by the other day and explained your goal – to kill the Silver Stag. That's rather ambitious."

Eliza's eyes dropped to the floor self-consciously. "I'm going to try at least," she said quietly. "Even if I'll probably fail."

"Well, I have a vested interest in your success now, so I wanted to mention that the competition has become quite fierce. The bounty has also been increased to 500 gold. It seems Lord Baen is getting a little more frantic. He must have a potential buyer for the pelt on the line." Evan looked at her with a sober expression. "You should be careful out there."

Eliza managed to meet his gaze, seeing that he was dead serious. "I mean it," Evan continued. "Don't hesitate to use your new toys. Even if you manage to slay the beast, the other travelers may simply take the pelt from you."

"I-I will," Eliza stuttered slightly. She wasn't about to correct him about why she was pursuing this quest. She wasn't exactly in it for the money. Regardless of the reason, it wouldn't matter much to him. Trying to tell someone else about the Hippie and all of his nonsense seemed like more of a headache than it was worth anyway.

With that, Eliza gathered up her new equipment, strapping the bundle of wands to her back and deciding to hold the tray of new cartridges so that they didn't get broken. It was a little unwieldy to carry everything at once, but she assumed she could travel in a lighter fashion once she had everything stored away at Alma's compound.

Eliza soon found herself standing outside of Evan' shop, the tray of cartridges grasped tightly in front of her. She could already see travelers passing the mouth of the alley as they wound their way through the nearby market. She couldn't help but reflect on what Evan had told her – and the conversation she had overheard on her way into town.

She hadn't meant to kill the players with her traps, but perhaps Evan was right. If she was to have any hope of slaying the Silver Stag and keeping its pelt, she might need to thin the herd – so to speak. Besides, if she were being completely honest with herself, it had been sort of fun to hear the other players talking about her, albeit in a slightly terrifying way.

The memory of her encounter with Rebecca and Josh earlier that day was also still fresh in her mind. Instead of removing her traps, what if she doubled down? A small, excited grin curled her lips as she considered ways she could ramp up her trap production and placement. She could only imagine her classmates' reactions if they knew what she was planning next.

Chapter 19 - Nefarious

Eliza got home from school early the next day, having decided to ditch PE. She had little interest in wasting time walking around a track when she had work to do in-game. Throwing her bag on the kitchen counter, she took the stairs up to the second floor two at a time – making it to the top in record time. As she stepped into her room, the terminal on her desk flashed to life, a screen flickering into existence above the wooden tabletop.

Before she logged into the game, she wanted to check the forums. She quickly pulled up the homepage for Rogue-Net, a site that catered to AO – acting as a cross between a player trading house and a forum. The forums themselves had been subdivided by the discovered game regions and cities, and she scrolled immediately to Falcon's Hook, her eyes skimming the posts. It didn't take her long to find what she was looking for. In fact, it was the very first post on the regional forum, with over 300,000 views.

The post was titled "The Ice Witch." The comments were rather enlightening, and Eliza still felt a chaotic mixture of pride and worry as she read through them. It had been a little scary to see so many people talking about her at first, but after several days without anyone catching onto her antics in-game, she had come to enjoy skimming the player feedback on her in-game exploits.

> **MonkeyKing:** I died… again. What the hell is going on with these damned traps? At first, it felt like there were only a handful, but now they're all over the forest west of Falcon's Hook.

> **Legolass:** The Witch strikes again… It's not the ice spikes that are the problem. It's the DOT with a 20-damage tick over 20 seconds. That's just a death sentence unless you have a healing potion (which most people can't afford at this point).

> **Kryptic:** Even then, you better drink it fast… and avoid the next trap two feet away.

Chango: Are we even sure this is a player? This doesn't seem possible. At this point, we know this is some variant of *Cold Grasp*, but how did they add the DOT? I personally think it's some sort of NPC boss.

Caltrops: An NPC that no one has seen? Really? Maybe this is one of the stag's abilities?

MonkeyKing: We had a full wipe because of this shit. Took us an hour to walk back and our bodies had already been picked clean. I don't care who is doing this or how. They just need to die – painfully.

Eliza chuckled at a few of the comments. She had taken Evan's advice to heart and had begun thinning out the players in the woods over the last few days by dramatically increasing the number of traps she laid in the forest. This was relatively easy since she spent most of the day harvesting ingredients while she set the traps, and then she used the evenings in-game to brew new poisons. She had also improved on her Wasting Poison, and the combination of her *Cold Grasp* spell and the poison was now usually enough to finish off anyone below level 40 unless they had immediate access to a healer.

However, she had been extremely careful not to reveal her identity – and she had continued delivering potions every so often for Alma to keep up appearances. She also didn't always loot the corpses, hoping that the deceased would infer that other players were stumbling upon the bodies. In short, she did everything in her power to make people think that there really was some sort of ghost haunting the woods.

Eliza would have loved to see the looks on her classmates' faces if they knew that their diminutive egghead – who was apparently also a lying, useless water mage – was secretly the infamous Ice Witch. The thought was tantalizing, but she had been careful not to say anything at school – instead, suffering through the boredom and her classmates' comments in stony silence.

Smiling to herself, Eliza hopped up from her chair and donned her headgear. She then laid down on her bed and tapped at the side of the helmet. A moment later, she was inside of AO. Her character sat perched on a branch roughly a dozen feet above the ground. Eliza had taken the liberty of purchasing a thick cloak with her newfound loot

and the dark green fabric helped to conceal her in the dense foliage of the forest.

First things first, she needed to check her progress. Eliza brought up her system UI and quickly checked her notifications.

x22 Level Up!
You have (0) undistributed stat points.

New Passive Skill: Climbing
After hours spent scurrying up trees to avoid your enemies, you've improved at this particular method of running away. Good for you!
Skill Level: Beginner Level 6
Effect: 6% increase to Strength and Dexterity when climbing.

New Passive Skill: Camouflage
Camouflage is the art of concealing things in plain sight. Sort of like an innocent potion-delivery maid who moonlights as a bloodthirsty sociopath – except more leaves and… well, whatever people typically use as camouflage.
Skill Level: Beginner Level 5
Effect: 5% increased chance to avoid Perception checks.

x5 Skill Rank Up: Cold Grasp
Skill Level: Intermediate Level 1
Effect 1: Increases radius by 11%
Effect 2: Increases damage by 1%

x5 Skill Rank Up: Poisons
Skill Level: Beginner Level 9
Effect: 9% chance to add a second random poison effect.

x1 Skill Rank Up: Herbalism
Skill Level: Intermediate Level 1
Effect 1: Allows the player to harvest more difficult or dangerous plants. 5.5% chance for double ingredients.
Effect 2: Low-level ingredients appear on the map and are highlighted.

x1 Skill Rank Up: Alchemy
Skill Level: Intermediate Level 3
Effect 1: Increases success chance of crafting potions and potion potency by 13%.

Effect 2: Reduces ingredient consumption by 3%.

She had made remarkable progress in just a few days. Her strategy of killing the other players was *much* more effective than attempting to hunt individual monsters or level solely by training her crafting. It also helped that her approach involved both combat and crafting, which allowed her to level even more quickly, by spending her evenings working on her *Alchemy* and *Herbalism* skills. She suspected that most players wasted the downtime during the evenings in-game when hunting became more difficult.

With a flick of her wrist, Eliza brought up her Character Status to review her progress.

Character Status			
Name:	Eliza	**Gender:**	Female
Level:	61	**Class:**	Water Mage
Race:	Human	**Alignment:**	True-Neutral
Fame:	0	**Infamy:**	3600
Health:	800	**H-Regen:**	2.30/Sec
Mana:	1750	**M-Regen:**	19.00/Sec
Stamina	800	**S-Regen:**	5.00/Sec
Str:	40	**Dex:**	40
Vit:	50	**End:**	50
Int:	105	**Will:**	105

Affinities			
Dark:	5%	**Light:**	4%
Fire:	2%	**Water:**	23%
Air:	2%	**Earth:**	9%

She had been hoarding stat points until yesterday when she had finally decided to start allocating them. After some deliberation, she had decided to allocate points to her *Intelligence* and *Willpower* to increase her mana pool and the power of her spells. Then she had assigned points to the remaining stats on a roughly equal basis. She saw a lot of benefit from *Strength* and *Dexterity* as she tried to navigate the forest and climb trees to avoid other players.

If only my real body were this nimble, she thought as she balanced easily in the tree – not for the first time resenting her clumsiness in the world. It turned out that a little *Dexterity* fixed that problem in-game.

Her plan was also coming along well. She had significantly reduced the number of players that were entering the western forest. Most had moved to the north and south of town to avoid the traps – the damage and respawn time being too costly for most low-level players. As a result, she was now in a position to more safely hunt the Silver Stag – which she knew to frequent a lake near her current location. She had been back to the lake on several occasions to scout it out, as well as to check how many players were hanging around that area.

At that thought, Eliza began her descent from the tree. She dropped carefully to a lower branch, and her feet thudded against the forest floor a moment later, her cloak flapping around her. With a swift gesture, she brought up her map and shifted it to her peripheral vision. Dozens of blue circles were shown all around her as she made her way forward – each indicating the location of her traps.

She stopped occasionally to loot a corpse or to refresh a trap location, making a circuitous path among the blue circles on her map. As a result, it took her nearly an hour to make it to the familiar lake to the southwest of Falcon's Hook. As she neared the shoreline, Eliza slowed and quickly climbed a nearby tree. She had learned to be careful and find a vantage point near the lake. Several other player groups had already figured out that the stag occasionally frequented this spot to drink.

As Eliza assumed a perch in a nearby tree, she pulled up her

map again. The lake rested nearby, its placid water reflecting the sunlight. She couldn't see anything out of the ordinary from her current location, but her map revealed that nearly every inch of the shoreline had been dotted with her traps. She had summoned the trap circles the evening before. She wasn't taking any chances.

The only plan Eliza had for the day was to wait for the stag. It should be coming back soon. She had seen it three times already – each event spaced about two days apart. By her calculations, today should be the day that the creature returned to the lake.

Hopefully, this would also be its last visit.

Eliza sat in the tree for hours without any sign of movement, eventually opening the in-game console and scouring the net for any additional information regarding the creature. There was precious little available, and most players were cautious about posting anything since there was still a bounty on the stag's head. Yet it never hurt to hunt for any possible advantage.

As she was finally starting to think about giving up for the day, Eliza detected a faint movement along the edge of the shore – just a slight tremble of a few leaves. It was more than she had seen in hours and her eyes trained on the spot, her breath catching hopefully.

Could this finally be it?

Slowly – to the point that it was almost painful – a single silver-furred hoof emerged from the brush. It was soon followed by the familiar body of the Silver Stag, its intricate horns jutting into the air. The creature seemed to be moving more cautiously than normal. Eliza could only assume that this meant that the players had become more daring over time. The deer sniffed at the air delicately and tilted its head from side to side as though scanning the area.

Seemingly convinced that there were no threats nearby, the creature took a few tentative steps toward the water. Eliza held her breath, her eyes darting to the map hovering in the air beside her. The stag was close to one of her traps – really, really close. If it took just one more step forward, she would finally have it.

Eliza's hands clenched at her cloak, balling the fabric between her fingers. She silently prayed for the deer to take that one final step forward. Its hoof lifted from the ground as though in slow motion and moved forward at a snail's pace. As her heart thumped in her chest, Eliza finally saw the stag's hoof land in the center of her trap circle.

Shards of ice immediately speared upward, shattering the two vials that Eliza had carefully placed in each trap circle. The spears were stained a mottled green and yellow – Eliza not wanting to cut corners when she was this close to finally attaining her goal. The beast's reflexes were amazing, and it nearly avoided the trap. However, an errant shard pierced the stag's leg, bright red blood

staining its silvery fur.

The beast let out a pained bleat, its leg trapped by the ice as the poisons swiftly entered its bloodstream. It smashed its antlers against the ice frantically, the bone tearing apart the spears quickly and finally freeing its leg. Then the Silver Stag tried to turn and run. It managed a single leap before faltering slightly, stumbling to the side off balance. It then took another wobbly step forward and sunk to its knees.

This was it. This was the moment that Eliza had been waiting for. She frantically dropped down from her perch, but as she reached the ground, she suddenly froze – the sound of voices drifting through the air.

"Look what we have here," a male voice boomed across the shore. "Someone was nice enough to leave the stag just lying here."

Eliza peeked out from behind the trunk of the tree, the bottom dropping out of her stomach as she saw a group of at least a dozen green-garbed players standing around the deer. The leader was familiar – she would remember that particular face anywhere. It was the same man that ordered her death a few days before. In fact, this entire situation gave her an eerie sense of déjà vu.

"After all this time, this seems a little anti-climactic," the player drawled. "Though I'm not one to look a gift horse in the mouth. Or should I say a gift *stag*," he added with a chuckle that was echoed by his crew. Without further ado, the player stabbed forward with his spear, neatly impaling the deer's throat and a helpless gurgle erupted from the pinned and poisoned creature.

Eliza could only look on in horror, her mind wheeling. What was she going to do? After coming all this way, could she really just let these players walk off with the stag? But how could she take on so many at once? She was too far away to use *Obscuring Mist,* and the players had somehow managed to avoid her traps – perhaps catching on to her novice camouflage?

What am I going to do? That single question kept rebounding through her head. She just didn't have an answer.

Chapter 20 - Duplicitous

Eliza bit her lip, her mind wracked by indecision as she watched the players mill around the corpse of the Silver Stag. Two of the men pulled their daggers and began the process of skinning the deer while the others stood guard nearby.

There were at least twelve of them, and she couldn't be certain that there weren't more hiding deeper in the forest. They were heavily armed, each member of the group robed in leather armor and carrying a spear. She also hadn't missed the longbows slung over their shoulders – indicating that they would be just as dangerous at a distance.

She huddled against the tree, pulling her dark green cloak tighter around her to better conceal her presence. Her *Ice Bolt* spell was out. At best, she could probably hit one or two before they took her down under a hail of arrows. Her *Obscuring Mist* and *Cold Grasp* were also ineffective at this range. She would need to be much, much closer to successfully use those spells.

Maybe I can just wait them out.

If she gave them time to finish up with the deer and head back to Falcon's Hook, she might be able to follow them through the woods and ambush them with her traps. Yet she immediately discarded that thought. She hadn't even seen the players until they dropped from *Sneak*. They were clearly stealthier than she was – which she had to admit wasn't saying much.

What does that leave me? She thought frantically, her stomach clenching as she saw how quickly the men were preparing the deer. If she didn't move soon, then she was going to lose her opportunity.

Her racing thoughts centered on the memory of her first encounter with the players. They had been dismissive of her – a young alchemist out in the woods by herself. They had challenged her story that she was just in the forest looking for ingredients and had only stumbled upon the stag by chance. However, she remembered that the leader and his crew had wavered. Realistically, what chance did an alchemist have of slaying the Silver Stag?

They had killed her primarily because they didn't want witnesses or anyone following them, but what if they had needed her for something?

That thought gave her pause, the germ of an idea beginning to take shape in Eliza's mind. It was crazy, and she would almost certainly die. Yet, even as her worries started to resurface, she

forcefully tamped down on them. This was a game, after all. What was the point of playing if she never took a risk? Was she going to back down now just because she was scared?

Eliza took a deep breath and then forced herself to take the first tentative step away from the tree, her thoughts focused on the story that she would need to tell the players. She was going to need to be very careful about how she played this.

She let her cloak part, revealing her brightly-stained tunic as she stooped to pick a nearby plant, handling the thorny stem gingerly. It was useless for her poisons, but the players wouldn't know that. At the same time, she began humming to herself, trying her best to go for a carefree tune. The sound that came out of her mouth sounded more like a baby bird dying than a happy whistle, but it was the best she could do under the circumstances.

As she kept up this act, Eliza made her way forward slowly, picking plants and trying her best to appear blissfully unaware of the heavily-armed players lingering at the edge of the lake – who would more than likely kill her. Needless to say, she was having some trouble keeping up appearances.

"Halt," a harsh voice barked a moment later.

Eliza looked up with wide eyes at the player who now stood nearby, an arrow leveled at her forehead and the bowstring taut. Her hand was frozen midway to another plant. "W-what's wrong?" she squeaked.

"Shut up. I'll be asking the questions," he snapped, his eyes stony. "Put your hands up and come this way quickly. No sudden movements."

Okay, this was a really stupid plan, Eliza thought morosely.

However, it was too late to back out now.

She followed the man's instructions as he guided her to the shore of the lake. The group of players looked up as they approached, their expressions hostile and their hands lingering on their weapons. They certainly wouldn't just let her go, but she had known that already.

"My, my. Our little alchemist returns!" the leader said, approaching slowly with a smirk curling his lips. "I suppose you didn't learn your lesson the first time."

"I found her picking plants in the forest," Eliza's guard reported. "She didn't seem to know we were here."

The leader glared at the guard before glancing at the stag's corpse. "Well, she certainly does now! Why didn't you kill her in the forest?"

"I-I thought she might have other teammates nearby," the guard muttered.

The leader sighed in exasperation before turning to Eliza. “It’s so difficult to find good help these days. As I’m sure you’ve noticed by now, we finally managed to slay the Silver Stag.” A proud little smile lingered on his lips. “It was quite the experience, between the so-called Ice Witch that’s haunting this forest and the million traps between here and town. But the Witch finally slipped up! In fact, we have her to thank for helping us complete the bounty.”

Turning back to Eliza, the man’s eyes went cold. “Now the question is what to do with you,” the man drawled. “I would have thought us killing you and looting your corpse would have driven the point home. You should not have returned to this lake.”

“I-I was just trying to collect some ingredients. This area had been dangerous with the Witch’s traps, but it’s also the only place where Ferrytail Grass grows naturally,” Eliza said quietly, keeping her eyes on the ground and doing her best to look timid. It wasn’t that difficult considering that there was a strong possibility she was about to die.

The leader’s forehead pinched as he inspected Eliza carefully, suspicion creeping across his face. “Hmph. You’re right that this place has become a death trap of late. Speaking of which, how *exactly* did you manage to get through all of the traps?”

I’ve got him now, Eliza thought, trying her best to keep a triumphant smile from drifting across her face. She just needed to keep up her act and pray that the players weren’t that familiar with the in-game magic system.

“Ahh… I…,” she began, looking uncertain.

The player’s eyes flashed angrily, suspicion clouding his features. He slowly drew a dagger from the sheath at his waist as he stalked toward her. “I suggest you think carefully about how you reply. I’ll only ask one more time. How did you avoid the traps?”

“T-they are water-based. I read that on the forums,” Eliza squeaked as she eyed the metal blade with wide, fearful eyes. She still remembered the sensation of a similar dagger running across her vulnerable throat.

“And how does that help?” the player demanded in frustration, although he withdrew slightly to let her speak.

“I-I can cast *Obscuring Mist*, and it r-reveals the outline of the traps,” Eliza murmured.

This was pure, unadulterated bullshit, of course, but she was banking on the players not knowing that. None of them appeared to be mages and general knowledge about the game mechanics was pretty scarce at the moment – as her recent visits to the online forums had quickly revealed.

“Oh, really?” the leader said, his eyebrows rising in surprise. He

spared a glance at his groupmates and saw that they were paying much closer attention to the conversation now. Several murmured to each other quietly, gesturing toward Eliza.

She felt another flash of triumph. *Yes, you need to make it back to town with the pelt in order to retrieve your reward, don't you?*

However, suspicion still lingered in the leader's eyes as he turned his gaze back to Eliza. "Well, if that's the case, then I'm sure you wouldn't mind giving us a little demonstration? There are likely more traps nearby. We've only tested about a ten-foot circle around the corpse," he explained, waving at the deer's body.

"Yes! I could probably help you get back to town without any trouble," Eliza said a little too quickly, playing her part. She was happy to give them a reason not to kill her and send her on a one-way trip back to Alma's cottage. She also noticed the way the man smiled at her desperation, and she could feel her lingering fear begin to morph into anger. These assholes had this coming.

"I'll need to use my wand, though," Eliza explained, gesturing toward one of the three metal rods strapped to her waist – each bearing a different colored band. "I-is that okay?"

"Sure, we'll just keep a few archers trained on you in case you try something funny," the leader explained, waving a hand at his men. Immediately, three arrows were nocked and pointed straight at Eliza.

She gulped hard but slowly grabbed the wand at her waist with a yellow band, being careful not to make any fast moves that might entice the archers to fire. Eliza then looked to the leader for permission before beginning her spell. At his nod, moisture began to accumulate in the air in front of her – quickly forming a sphere of water. Before the ball could completely take shape, she inserted her wand and discretely depressed the button on its side. She didn't want the bandits to know that she had changed the color of the orb.

The sphere continued to grow in size, glowing a brilliant yellow. The leader looked at the sphere with an arched eyebrow. "An odd color for water," he commented dryly.

"I-it always does this," Eliza assured him, trying for her best "pleading waif" look. Apparently, it worked because the leader nodded and motioned for her to continue.

Here it comes, she thought as she felt the spell nearing completion. She couldn't help the small smile that tugged at her lips, and she would never forget the look of surprise on the leader's face as he caught sight of her ghost of a grin. He opened his mouth to shout a warning…

But it was too late.

The mist exploded outward in every direction, billowing and rolling across the muddy ground of the shore. The fog left only a small

pocket of clear air in the center of the maelstrom of moisture – just enough that Eliza wouldn't be affected by her own poison. As she finished casting, she immediately dropped to the ground, hearing the sound of missiles whistling through the air above her as the archers released. The shouts of the player's echoed through the fog – yet it was so dense that they couldn't make each other out through the vapor.

Then the coughing began. Eliza remained prone, waiting patiently until she heard twelve thumps – signaling that the players had dropped to the ground. She ordered her mist to move away from the bodies but to maintain a close circle around the disabled group of players. She couldn't be certain that there weren't more archers in the woods, and the mist would help obscure her from sight.

The leader's body became visible only moments later, his eyes wide and staring straight ahead as he lay prone on the ground. Eliza pushed herself to her feet and approached at a leisurely pace. She had improved on her Paralytic Poison, and it now lasted nearly sixty seconds depending on the dosage. Her mist also sat at the ready and could be recalled in order to administer a second dose if needed. The second application reduced the effect of the poison – with a steeply diminishing return – but she didn't expect that she would need much more time.

The man's breathing was ragged and uneven and grew more rapid as Eliza stepped toward him. Her eyes were a cold, glowing sapphire as she channeled her mana and she could feel the energy settling throughout her body. As she neared the man, she stooped – looking him straight in the eye.

Eliza's thoughts drifted back to the videos of Jason's attack on Lux and the creation of the Twilight Throne. His performances were ruthless but effective, and there was a reason that the other players feared him. She would need to accomplish something similar here. Eliza needed to send a message that the players wouldn't forget. Especially since they had seen her face.

"I-I know… who… you…," the player gasped, managing only a few words before the paralytic took hold completely and only a faint gurgle escaped his lips.

She smiled at the man's feeble twitches. "Do you? Do you really? Did you know who I was when you had your men cut my throat?"

Her voice was cold as she continued, "You deserve much worse than what I'm going to do to you. Let me be clear, I now have a screenshot of your faces," she said, raising her voice as she tapped at her system UI. "If I see any of you in this forest again or any mention of me online, I will hunt *you* down. Forget about spawn camping.

What you need to be afraid of is *pain*, because this– *this* is only just the tip of the iceberg."

As she finished speaking, Eliza began casting an *Ice Bolt* – the crystalline shard forming in the air and centering on the man's face. The icy spear inched forward, slowly closing in on one of his eyes. The muscles in the man's face twitched, and a desperate gurgle escaped his lips – as though he was trying to beg for his life.

As she watched the man squirm, Eliza felt a pang of guilt. She hesitated. This was different than the troll or the bear. This was a person staring up at her – not a computer program or a monster. This was a real, *human* person. Could she really do this?

Then the image of the man's leering face flashed through her mind's eye – his expression remorseless and amused as he ordered one of his group to slit her throat. She remembered the way he had seemed to revel in her fear only moments before. He would have done the same to her and maybe even worse. More than that, she needed to protect herself and Alma. She couldn't afford to have this blowback on her or the people she cared about.

As her mind spun chaotically and she grappled with what she was about to do, an odd sense of balance suddenly settled over Eliza's mind, quieting the warring voices that bounced through her mind. It was a strange feeling – intangible and difficult to pinpoint. In the sudden calm, Alma's words returned to her as she stood over the prone player. This was just the way of this world. This man wouldn't have hesitated to kill Eliza. She thought about the pain he had caused her and the pleasure he had taken in administering that pain. How many others had he harmed? With her body and mind awash in mana, she accepted this truth without hesitation.

He deserved this.

With that thought, she released her spell. The ice shard rocketed forward, closing the small space between Eliza and the player almost instantly before embedding itself deeply in the man's eye. Blood bubbled around the wound, and his body spasmed, his nervous system still responding to the muted pain despite the paralytic coursing through his veins. Another bolt in his other eye – still staring at her in horror – ended his life.

Then Eliza turned back to the remaining members of the group, their prone forms lying around her, encircled by the glowing, malignant golden mist. Their wide, unblinking eyes were filled with a desperate terror, and their limbs twitched as they tried vainly to order their reluctant bodies to flee.

As Eliza watched them with glowing sapphire eyes, she began to automatically summon another barrage of icy projectiles, the shards forming around her in a maelstrom of frigid vapor. The same strange

sensation washed over her once more – one she had trouble putting a name to. It felt like she hovered upon a mental precipice between light and dark. Her actions were neither right nor wrong. They just *were*. She reveled in the sense of peace that the feeling afforded her.

In the real world, she might be too weak to confront her parents, and her classmates might dismiss her. She might be uncertain about her future and afraid to reach out to her peers. But here, in this place, she was the Ice Witch. She was a force of nature. And her judgment was absolute and final.

Chapter 21 - Picky

It took Eliza a few hours to make her way back to Alma's cottage. She had stopped to check on her traps and gather some additional ingredients. As the familiar compound came into sight, she felt a small wave of sadness sweep over her. She had spent so much time in the forest over the last few days that she had become accustomed to the background hum of the insects and the dappled sunlight sneaking through the twining patchwork of branches that loomed overhead. With her quest now complete, she didn't exactly have a good reason to return.

However, if she were being honest with herself, she knew that it was more than that.

On the long trek back to Alma's cottage, her thoughts had kept returning to how she had killed the players and the eerie calm that had overcome her as she ended each of their lives. It had almost felt like another person had killed those players. Once she had let go of her mana, the same sense of guilt and trepidation had come rushing back. She knew she had done what was necessary, but she had still been unable to meet the vacant gaze of the players she had killed and had quickly fled the lake after retrieving the pelt.

Logically, she knew that she had been killing people for days. But there was something distinctly different between laying a few traps in the woods and killing other players in cold blood. She kept telling herself it was just a game, but that explanation rang hollow as she recalled the look in their eyes – and the very real fear she had seen there.

Even worse, a part of her secretly yearned for that sense of balance that had come with channeling her mana. And the power and triumph she had felt by besting the players. There was something strangely appealing about becoming the Ice Witch – something freeing. These sensations were foreign to Eliza, but they had been tantalizing. She was reluctant to give that up, despite her misgivings about what she had done.

As a result, it was with mixed feelings that Eliza arrived back at Alma's compound. A brief inspection of the grounds revealed that the older woman was absent, possibly working in her hidden laboratory. Eliza took the opportunity to walk through the garden, inspecting the plants carefully to see if they needed tending as she tried to clear her head.

"It's always nice to stop and smell the roses on occasion," the

Hippie said, appearing directly beside Eliza. She jumped, squeaking in surprise, which earned her a wry grin from the god. “Or massacre a whole slew of players,” he commented with a raised eyebrow. “Who knew our little water mage was such an accomplished killer!”

Eliza choked back at the lump in her throat at the god’s callous comment before frowning at the irritating young man – her guilt morphing into anger. “I didn’t have much choice. You neglected to point out that half of Falcon’s Hook was also hunting the Silver Stag.”

The Hippie just shrugged and grinned at her. “Speaking of which, did you manage to slay our dear deer… huh, now that’s an odd expression!” the Hippie said, coming up short and murmuring the words to himself over and over using different inflections.

“Anyway,” Eliza interjected before the god could completely lose focus, “to answer your question, I did retrieve the pelt– although I didn’t technically kill the deer myself.” As she finished speaking, she pulled the leather bundle from her bag and handed it to the god.

“Close enough!” he said, snatching the leather and examining it closely, running his fingers across the silky silver fur and holding it close to his eyes to get a better look – as though he didn’t quite believe it was the genuine article. As he finished inspecting the leather, his brow furrowed, and a frown tugged at his lips.

“Well, this *looks* like the right pelt,” he began slowly before rounding on Eliza. “But is this vegan, free-range, cruelty-free leather? Fluffy can be kind of a stickler for that sort of thing, you know.”

Eliza just stared at the Hippie. “What? What does that even mean? How can leather be vegan…? I mean, I helped kill the stag… You sent me after that creature specifically!”

The Hippie waved a hand in her direction. “Oh, don’t worry. We can just tell Fluffy that no animals were harmed in the making of his new collar. It’s amazing what they can do with faux-fur these days…,” the god murmured to himself, ignoring the fact that Eliza’s face was now flush with confused anger.

Fluffy took this opportunity to make his appearance, circling out from behind a nearby bush and giving the Hippie a long-suffering look. Apparently, even the sheep had his limits when it came to the god’s inane jabbering. He stepped toward the Hippie and butted his arm with his head gently as though to say, “Get on with it already.”

The god glanced at his pet in surprise. “Ahh, and here is the sheep of the hour! I’m ready to make your collar, Fluffy!” he exclaimed excitedly. With that statement, the god snapped his fingers.

The leather responded immediately, floating into the air as a ribbon of the material was neatly severed by an invisible knife. The leather band warped and changed before Eliza’s eyes – undergoing an incredibly fast curing process before binding itself into a rather

normal-looking collar, replete with metal clasp. Eliza couldn't help but wonder where the stitching and metal had come from, but she didn't really have the heart to ask. She was certain the god wouldn't give her a straight answer anyway.

With the new collar now in hand, the Hippie stepped over to Fluffy and placed it around his neck, clasping it tightly. "It fits like a glove! Or… err… a collar, I suppose," the Hippie said. "What do you think, Fluffy?"

The sheep hopped slightly to the side as he tried to look at the collar that was now bound around his neck. The leather band made his wool poof up around his head and shoulders, giving him a slightly comical appearance.

"What do you think, Eliza?" the Hippie asked, nudging her with his elbow and giving her a meaningful look.

"Oh… I-it looks amazing Fluffy," she said, trying to muster some enthusiasm. What she got in return was a suspicious look from the sheep – who hadn't quite given up on trying to inspect his own collar.

"I think you look majestic! Truly a marvel to behold really," the Hippie added, nodding a little too quickly. "There's just the matter of your fur kind of bunching…"

The god stopped mid-sentence as Fluffy went suddenly still, glaring at the young man with a deadly expression. "Wait," the god said, putting up his hands quickly. "I was mistaken. It really doesn't look bad at all. A little grooming will fix that situation right up. You know, a snip here and there."

Fluffy took an ominous step forward toward the Hippie. "It really doesn't look bad," Eliza interjected quickly. "Your fur is just a little bushy right now. Maybe you just need a haircut?" This earned her a glare from the sheep, and then he just seemed to deflate, stepping away from the pair and trudging back behind his bush.

"I told you he can be kind of sensitive," the Hippie whispered to Eliza, cupping his mouth with his hand conspiratorially.

He sighed before looking at the water mage with a more serious expression. "Fluffy's little tantrum aside, I suppose you still accomplished my quest." He waved his hand, and a notification appeared in front of Eliza.

Quest Completed: Fantastic Fashion

You finally managed to slay the Silver Stag – well, sort of. But it totally counts, so don't worry! Fluffy wasn't really enamored with his new collar, but that also isn't technically your fault. Although, you

did mention that he needed a haircut… You probably should have known better than to question the Great Black Sheep's appearance.

Difficulty: A
Success: Slay the Silver Stag and return its pelt to the Hippie.
Failure: Fail to kill the stag or return its pelt. Continue to question the Hippie's unwavering integrity.
Reward: Unknown

x3 Level Up!
You have (15) undistributed stat points.

x1 Skill Rank Up: Cold Grasp
Skill Level: Intermediate Level 2
Effect 1: Increases radius by 12%
Effect 2: Increases damage by 2%

x1 Skill Rank Up: Herbalism
Skill Level: Intermediate Level 2
Effect 1: Allows the player to harvest more difficult or dangerous plants. 6% chance for double ingredients.
Effect 2: Low-level ingredients appear on the map and are highlighted.

x1 Skill Rank Up: Alchemy
Skill Level: Intermediate Level 4
Effect 1: Increases success chance of crafting potions and potion potency by 14%.
Effect 2: Reduces ingredient consumption by 4%.

"So, about that reward…" Eliza said, swiping away her notification and glancing at the water god.

"What reward?" he asked in confusion.

"The reward for completing the quest," she said slowly, clenching her fists and trying her best not to smack the Hippie upside the head. After all the time and effort she had put into this, was he really going to leave her hanging?

"Oh, well isn't the journey the reward itself?" the god replied glibly, waving a dismissive hand. "You've grown so much and become quite popular around town. If anything, you should probably be *thanking* me."

He hesitated as he realized that Eliza was now the one glaring at him. “Uh, okay. Your reward… right. I must have left it around here somewhere,” he murmured glancing frantically around the garden.

His eyes eventually rested on the remaining leather that sat in a haphazard pile on the ground – the Hippie having only used a sliver of the material to create Fluffy’s new collar. “What about some fine leather? I also heard there’s a bounty out for the Stag – some guy in Falcon’s Hook really wants it. Have you heard anything about that?”

It took most of Eliza’s considerable patience not to hit the god. She should have known better. He never seemed to plan more than one step ahead – and, even then, he waited until the last minute and acted only on impulse.

“Fine. Just fine,” she muttered, grabbing at the leather and stuffing it into her pack. She wasn’t sure what she would do with the gold, but she supposed it didn’t really matter.

She turned to ask the god another question, only to discover that he had disappeared once again. Eliza couldn’t help but grumble to herself. What was even the point of these silly quests? Were they really all about spending time creating accessories for the god’s pet sheep? Shouldn’t he be doing something more meaningful – like, you know, god things…?

Although, as she thought about it, would she really want the Hippie answering her prayers or dealing with serious issues like plagues or other disasters? He was really more likely to cause a flood than stop one. Perhaps it was best that he was focused on frivolous things. That was probably safer for everyone – except maybe for her and Fluffy.

“You look like you’ve sucked on something sour,” Alma said from behind Eliza, her cane making a rhythmic thump as she approached. “Something the matter?”

“Just idiot gods and their stupid quests,” Eliza muttered. She held up the edge of the pelt for Alma to see as she continued to stuff the fabric into her pack. “But I did manage to kill the stag and recover the pelt, which I guess I can turn in for the bounty. So, that’s a victory I suppose.”

“I had no doubt you would come out victorious,” the older woman said with a kindly smile. Then she glanced up at the sun, noting that it was still early afternoon. “If you have nothing planned, we could make the trek into town together. Lord Baen asked for a batch of potions a few days ago, so I’m heading in the same direction.”

Eliza nodded, letting out a soft sigh. She didn’t have anything better to do, so why not? She spared a glance at the older alchemist

out of the corner of her eye as the pair headed for the boundary of her compound, the familiar trail looming before them. At least Alma would be better company than the Hippie.

Chapter 22 - Miserly

"Is this it?" Eliza asked.

"I realize that it isn't much to look at now, but, believe it or not, House Baen used to be a rather powerful and influential trading house in the city. It still is in some ways, but they have fallen on hard times lately."

Alma and Eliza stood outside of a large wooden structure on the eastern edge of Falcon's Hook. The building abutted the cliff face that looked out on the bay far below, sunlight refracting off the constantly moving surface of the water. The crash of waves beating against the cliffs caused a dull roar to cascade up from the bay below.

As Eliza inspected the dilapidated structure, she noted that the boards were cracking and crumbling, rot riddling their surface. A single shingle dangled by the entrance and creaked on rusty chains as it swayed in the wind. The image on the sign's surface was faded and worn. They were the only pair waiting outside the door and most of the townsfolk passed by the building without sparing it a second glance.

Looking at the trade house itself, Eliza was a little skeptical that Lord Baen would be able to pay the bounty he had posted for the Silver Stag. Alma must have picked up on her thoughts because she placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder and squeezed. "Don't worry, girl. I will make sure our good *Lord* doesn't cheat you."

With a sigh, Eliza pushed open the door and stepped inside. The building's interior did little to ease her worry. The entry chamber was a large rectangle, rows of desks stacked up against one wall. There was no line to wait for an attendant. Instead, the pair was met by the bored expression of a single young man sitting in the center of the cavernous room.

"Hello, there," the man said, trying to muster some enthusiasm. "Welcome to the Baen Trading House. What can I help you with today?"

"We're here to collect…," Eliza began.

"We're here to deliver some potions to Lord Baen," Alma said, stepping forward and interrupting Eliza before she could finish speaking. The older woman gave Eliza a subtle shake of her head to warn her away from mentioning the bounty. "He ordered some healing potions a while back – mentioning a cough."

The small flicker of excitement that had initially entered the young man's eyes quickly died out. "Ahh, in that case, Lord Baen's

office is upstairs. Third door on the right," he said, before immediately turning his attention back to the papers on his desk.

"What was that?" Eliza whispered as the pair made their way up the stairs, Eliza supporting Alma's elbow to help the older woman make the climb.

"There's no sense telling that brat that we're carrying something worth 500 gold. Do you really think he'd have let us into Lord Baen's office?" Alma asked. "We'll have a much better chance of collecting the bounty if we speak with the Lord directly."

Eliza couldn't help but shake her head. She hadn't really considered that the young man might try to cheat them – which made her feel a little naïve. Maybe it was a good thing that Alma had volunteered to come with her. It wasn't as though she needed the money, but she would prefer to get *something* out of the Hippie's asinine quest.

The pair soon stood in front of a solid oak door, and Alma rapped the surface with her cane in a sharp staccato rhythm. "Come in!" someone barked from inside the room and Eliza opened at a gesture from Alma.

Despite the appearance of the rest of the building, Lord Baen's office was breathtaking. The room was immaculate and had been organized with military precision. A fire burned off to the side, casting a warm glow about the office, the light reflecting off the polished surface of the wooden furniture lingering about the room.

Yet it was the view that took Eliza's breath away. The entire back wall of the office led out onto a terrace overlooking the cliffs, providing an unimpeded view of the bay far below – the waters stretching out toward the horizon. A gentle breeze drifted through the door to the terrace, heavy with the tang of salt.

"Ahh, Alma," Lord Baen said, his voice more cordial once he saw his guests. "I thought you were that boy downstairs. He's always pestering me over the smallest matters," he offered with a small smile, rising from his seat with a low groan.

Eliza finally had a chance to inspect Lord Baen. She wasn't sure what she had expected, but the hunched and aging old man that stood before her didn't quite match her mental image. Just like Alma, he walked with a cane, although he seemed to favor his leg as he approached – indicating an ancient injury.

Lord Baen offered a hand to Alma. "It's always a pleasure," he said, his wrinkled face split into a kind smile. Then he turned his attention to Eliza. "And who is this young lady?"

"My name is Eliza," she managed to squeak out. There was something in the older man's eyes that sent a shiver up her back – like he was calculating and weighing her as he would a sack of grain.

Maybe it was best if she let Alma do the talking. The older woman seemed to be familiar with Lord Baen and Eliza was already worried she might mess this up.

"She's my new apprentice," Alma explained in a cordial tone.

"Ahh, it's about time that you took on someone younger to help with your business. I worry about you traveling to and from town by yourself and lugging around those potions," Lord Baen said, motioning for the group to take a seat near the fire. "As we get older, we need to rely on more youthful arms and legs."

"Indeed," Alma said, although Eliza noted the flash of annoyance on the alchemist's face at the implication that she was no longer fit to travel on her own.

"So, what brings you here?" Lord Baen asked as they settled in their chairs – the two women flanking him on either side.

"We're actually delivering a batch of fresh potions," Alma explained, gesturing at Eliza to pull out the crate and set it on the small table in the center of the cluster of chairs. "You mentioned you were nearly out, and I know how your leg pains you."

"Ahh, thank you!" Lord Baen said appreciatively. "It must have slipped my mind. I suppose that's another side effect of age."

"Perhaps. How is business lately?" Alma asked, shifting the subject delicately.

Lord Baen grimaced slightly. "We continue to lose our trade ships heading north along the coast. The mists around Anguine Island have begun to spread further afield, and any ship that enters the fog simply disappears. Our crews have become increasingly nervous, as I'm sure you're aware."

Alma frowned slightly. "Is Lord Cairn encountering similar difficulties?"

"Our *competition* seems to be thriving, and a more suspicious person might begin to think that he's behind many of these disappearances – or at least that he is taking advantage of our misfortune," Lord Baen replied with a grimace. "Lately, his cargo holds seem more full than usual."

The older man sighed, waving his dismissive hand. "But you likely didn't come all this way to about my problems. Was there something else I can do for you ladies?"

"In fact, we also have another matter to discuss, which is why we didn't simply drop off the potions with your man downstairs," Alma replied, a small, sly smile gracing her lips.

"Oh really? What exactly did you want to talk about? Are you finally thinking about renegotiating our *arrangement*?" Lord Baen inquired, the same hawkish look reappearing on his face. "I may start venturing south along the coast if our family's ill fortune continues

much longer, and I know a few merchants that may be interested in your *particular* merchandise."

Eliza's eyes snapped to the old trader at this comment. Did he know that Alma manufactured poisons in her secret lab? That certainly seemed to be the implication Lord Baen had given. Although, on second thought, how would Alma sell her poisons without a connection to at least one of the trade houses?

"Not exactly," Alma replied evenly. "We actually came to collect on the bounty you offered for the Silver Stag. Eliza, could you show him the pelt please?"

Eliza quickly obliged the alchemist, pulling the leather from her bag and placing it gently over the top of the crate of potions. She noticed how Lord Baen's eyes widened in shock, unable to control his expression at seeing the silver fur.

"Hmm, are you certain this is the pelt?" he asked, directing the question to Alma. He had recovered quickly, and Eliza could already tell that he was trying to figure out how to wheedle his way out of paying the full amount for the leather.

"It is," Eliza said calmly. "I slayed the beast myself."

This earned her another surprised expression from the older man, and she noticed Alma smirk in amusement behind his back. "Really?" he asked in an incredulous tone. "Your apprentice is full of surprises apparently!"

"She is indeed. I've found Eliza to be a remarkably capable young woman. You can inspect the pelt yourself to determine whether it is fake or not," Alma said, gesturing to the pelt.

Lord Baen leaned forward, brushing his fingers gently against the silver fur that lined the leather as his eyes reviewed an invisible series of notifications. "Hmm, this does indeed appear to be the genuine article – or an uncanny forgery." He held up a hand to forestall Alma's retort. "Not that I'm implying that this is a ruse. You know me well enough by now to know that I'd sell even a knock-off if it were this high quality."

"Your standards are impeccable," Alma offered in a dry voice. "Now, about the matter of payment…?"

"Ahh, well I see that a small strip has been cut from this corner," Lord Baen said quickly. "I'm not sure I can offer the full bounty for partial goods… Perhaps 400 gold would be more appropriate?"

"480," Alma said calmly, unperturbed by the older man's attempt to weasel his way out of payment. "And not a coin less."

Lord Baen grimaced and glanced back at the balcony, his eyes resting on the waters of the bay for a moment as he contemplated the counteroffer. Then he turned his gaze back to the group, focusing on

Eliza with a thoughtful expression. She shifted uncomfortably under his scrutiny – again reminded of a predator.

"How about 475 and a favor from your new apprentice?" the old trader asked.

Eliza frowned, her mind wheeling as she tried to anticipate what this *favor* might entail. "What exactly did you have in mind?" she asked hesitantly.

"Nothing too strenuous," Lord Baen said with a shrug. "Particularly for someone as competent as yourself. I'd just like you to investigate a farm north of town."

"Really? And we're expected to believe that this is a simple visit?" Alma asked with an arched eyebrow.

"Well, technically, this farm is owned by Lord Cairn's trade house – or at least I suspect it may be. I would like to determine if anything unusual is happening at the farm. Eliza has proven to be quite capable of handling herself, and no one would suspect an alchemist's apprentice." He leveled his gaze at Alma, giving her a knowing look. "As I am sure you are *well* aware, your profession opens many doors."

"I don't think that…" Alma began.

"I'll do it," Eliza said quickly, Lord Baen's grin widening at her answer.

"Are you sure?" Alma asked, concern in her eyes.

Eliza nodded at the alchemist. If she were being honest with herself, she was curious to explore other parts of the game world. Besides, it might be best if she postponed her "other" activities for a while. People might start catching on to her traps and might grow suspicious of the young alchemist who always seemed to be out in the forest collecting herbs. Besides, Lord Baen was right. She had some recent firsthand experience with how easily other players and NPCs seemed to discount her as a threat.

New Quest: Merchant's Quandary

Lord Baen has asked you to investigate a farm north of Falcon's Hook that is owned by a rival trading house. Of course, the lord was incredibly vague and didn't give you specific instructions. So… yeah, you're probably going to fail at this. But good luck!

Difficulty: B
Success: Investigate the farm and report back to Lord Baen.
Failure: Ignore this quest or fail to bring back juicy intel.
Reward: Money you were already entitled to. Good job?

Eliza couldn't help but let out a soft sigh as she reviewed the quest prompt. It felt like the notifications kept getting more and more judgmental. Not that it mattered. She had already committed herself. Besides, snarky or not, the prompt wasn't wrong.

"What exactly should I be looking for at this farm?" Eliza asked Lord Baen as she swiped away the quest prompt.

"Nothing specific. I'm just interested in whether you notice anything unusual. My own investigations have come away with little information, but I suspect that Lord Cairn is up to *something* out there in the wilderness. Why else would he invest in a farm in the middle of nowhere?"

Eliza grimaced. Maybe the prompt was right. That was pretty vague, and just a little worrisome. She anticipated that there was more to this seemingly innocuous quest than appeared at first blush. "Fine," she finally said, chewing on her lip. "I'll make the trip tomorrow. In the meantime, I believe you promised us some gold."

Lord Baen smiled broadly, beginning to stand up. "Of course. Let me just retrieve the funds from my safe." He hesitated for a moment, meeting Eliza's gaze once more. "I look forward to working together. I think this is the beginning of a lovely new relationship."

Eliza wasn't certain she shared the man's enthusiasm, and the look in his eye sent a shiver up her back. She didn't exactly trust him, but she was beginning to realize that nothing in this world came without a little risk. At the same time, it was just a farm. Honestly, how bad could it be?

Chapter 23 - Haphazard

Eliza was hunched over a workbench in Alma's secret lab. Her brow was furrowed in concentration as she waited for the liquid simmering on the burner to reach the appropriate temperature. In one hand, the young mage held a small disc covered in a gray fungus. She was being extremely careful to avoid touching the substance. She had quickly discovered that Carnivore Mold wasn't something that should be toyed with lightly. Even the smallest amounts would eat through skin and flesh at an alarming rate.

To make matters worse, the mold had a minor paralytic effect. In the wild, it deadened the nerves of its target – acting similar to a local anesthetic. Eliza expected that the mold would be incredibly dangerous if a creature weren't aware that it had touched the substance. The mold would likely eat away at the animal's flesh before it even realized that it was in danger. She had no idea how Alma had managed to harvest the mold in the first place, but she wasn't about to question it.

The way Eliza's wands were designed, it was quite difficult to utilize multiple poisons at the same time and combining the tinctures had proven ineffective. Her hope was that she could invent a new poison that would have both a paralyzing effect while also causing damage over time. That was the goal anyway. She hadn't quite figured out the exact formula yet.

As the mixture in front of her reached the appropriate temperature, Eliza tilted the disc forward and gently scraped the mold into the boiling water. She then disposed of the disc in the fire that lingered in the corner of the lab. She had already made the mistake of accidentally bumping into the little petri dish and wasn't about to repeat that mistake a second time. The still tender flesh along her wrist and the empty healing vial sitting beside her did a good job of reminding her of her own stupidity.

She watched anxiously as the mixture on the table flared, changing from orange to a bright yellow before settling into a neutral water-like substance.

Potion mixture failed.

"Damn it," Eliza muttered, dumping the content of the dish

onto the fire – where it sizzled and popped – before leaning back against the workbench and rubbing at her eyes beneath her glasses. That was at least the twentieth experiment that had failed.

With a sigh, she looked up, noticing faint rays of sunlight beginning to leak through the shuttered windows of the lab. It looked like she had spent yet another full night in Alma's secret laboratory – the older woman having gone to sleep long ago. Unfortunately, Eliza didn't have much to show for it.

While she and Alma had been in Falcon's Hook, Eliza had made sure to stop by Evan's shop to order some new merchandise. She'd purchased new equipment for herself, and for Alma's lab with the funds provided by Lord Baen. At the very least, she could partially repay Alma for all of her help and guidance by replacing some of her older alchemy tools. Once they had made it back to the compound, Eliza had also been excited to try out the new equipment.

Now she needed to complete Lord Baen's silly quest. She wasn't certain what she might find at this "farm" – if that's really what it was. She didn't know why the old trader couldn't afford to hire other spies. Maybe he really was desperate and broke. If that was the case, at least she'd managed to get her money upfront.

I may as well get started.

With that grudging thought, she grabbed her pack and headed for the door. As she exited the lab, she spared one final glance behind her – noticing that the building blended seamlessly back into the forest as soon as the door closed. If she hadn't known the lab was there, she would never have thought to look for it beside the tool shed.

"And how is my favorite little water mage doing this fine day?" a voice said from behind Eliza. She couldn't help but groan, already knowing what she would find when she turned around. Yet that didn't make the infuriating grin on the Hippie's face any easier to bear.

"What do you want?" Eliza asked bluntly.

"Is that any way to greet your friend and divine benefactor?" the god asked, placing a hand to his chest in mock offense.

"I'm not sure I agree with either of those two descriptions," Eliza muttered, stomping past the god and heading for the trail leading to the main road. She had carefully plotted out her course last night after Lord Baen had updated her map with the location of the farm.

"Well, I'll wear you down eventually!" the Hippie said, unperturbed by her poor humor. "But, to answer your question, I thought you could use some company on your little hike. It can be lonely walking the road by yourself."

"How thoughtful of you," Eliza replied dryly. "And I'm sure you

don't have any ulterior motive…"

"Well, now that you mention it," the Hippie began with a smile, "You might have noticed that Fluffy is absent today." He shook his head, his expression suddenly morose. "He has really been in a funk since you pointed out that his wool has gotten a bit – *bushy*."

"Technically, you said it first," Eliza snapped, glaring at the god.

"Hmm, in any event, I want to do something to cheer him up. He can be quite sensitive about his appearance, you know. A bit *sheepish*, if you catch my drift" he said with a broad smile.

Eliza couldn't help but groan again. "One more pun and we're walking in silence for the rest of the trip."

"Fair enough. But I really would like to do something to help Fluffy get his mojo back. Something to put a little pep back in his step."

"Or rhyming…" Eliza grumbled.

"Fine! Anyway, I was thinking that we could do something to sort of… bedazzle his collar. Maybe add some bling," he continued in a distracted voice. Eliza spared a glance at the god, who was rubbing at his chin thoughtfully.

"What do most people put on a collar?" the Hippie asked.

"I don't know. A nametag or something?" Eliza replied. Leave it to the god of water to be more concerned about his pet's collar than anything else. "Or maybe a bell?" she offered half-heartedly.

The Hippie perked up at that, his eyes lighting with excitement. "That's a fantastic idea! A bell would be perfect. It would be stylish – farm-animal-chic even. And we would never lose him in a crowd!"

"Great. There's probably a ton of bells that you could buy in Falcon's Hook," Eliza said quickly. "Do we really need to turn this into a–"

She stopped short as a notification flashed in front of her eyes.

New Quest: Ringing a Bell

Fluffy has become despondent and inconsolable after your extraordinarily harsh and ill-timed remarks. To make it up to him, you should find a bell that would be a suitable addition to his collar. But not just any bell will do! No, you will need to make it up to Fluffy by procuring something special!

Difficulty: A
Success: Acquire a bell for Fluffy's collar.
Failure: Let down your cutest and most courageous companion.

Reward: Knowing that Fluffy's mind will be put at ease.

Before Eliza could accept or reject the quest notification, it abruptly disappeared and was automatically added to her quest log. She yet again resisted the urge to smack the Hippie – although, she was skeptical that she would actually be able to hit him with the way he seemed to teleport about. Putting aside the fact that the quest hadn't explained where she was supposed to find a "special" bell, the whole thing just seemed ridiculous.

"This doesn't even tell me where I'm supposed to find…" she began, only to find that the Hippie had once again deserted her. Not that she was surprised. This seemed to be his new MO – drop a quest on her and then bolt.

"Coward," she muttered.

With another exasperated sigh, Eliza kept walking. She was sure the details of the idiot god's latest quest would be revealed eventually. In the meantime, she could deal with "investigating" this farm for Lord Baen.

It took Eliza several hours to make it to the location marked on her map. Lord Baen hadn't been lying when he explained that the farm was in the middle of nowhere. The foot traffic on the road leading away from Falcon's Hook had quickly dwindled, and the forests had given away to rolling hills and plains as Eliza headed steadily north – tall grasses waving in the stiff breeze that drifted through the hills.

As she crested a final hill, the "farm" came into view. Eliza came up short, her eyes darting back and forth between the structure in the valley below and the marker on her map. This couldn't be right.

"This is a farm?" Eliza asked aloud, her voice incredulous as she tugged her cloak more tightly around her – the wind whipping at the material.

The scene before her didn't look anything like her mental image of a farm. There was no red barn or simple farmhouse. Instead, she was looking at a miniature town, a few dozen buildings ringed by a tall roughhewn, wooden wall. Smoke drifted from multiple chimneys, and she could see herds of animals being overseen by shepherds on the hills surrounding the compound.

As Eliza continued inspecting the "farm," her brow furrowed in confusion. Not only was the compound ringed by a rather impressive wall, but there also appeared to be sentries stationed on the ramparts, each man and woman armed with a longbow. They were attired in matching clothing – which gave them a militaristic appearance.

Her eyes gravitated toward the structure jutting from the center of the compound. It towered over the other buildings, standing at least three or four stories tall. At the top was a giant iron bell that swayed gently in the breeze. Eliza could already feel a heavy weight settle in her stomach as she saw the bell.

"Oh, no," she murmured, backpedaling quickly.

She wasn't fast enough to stop the quest update that appeared in front of her.

Quest Update: Ringing a Bell

After arriving at the "farm," you couldn't help but notice the gigantic bell in the center of the compound. You immediately knew that this was the bell that Fluffy needed for his collar and absolutely no other bell would do. Despite the monumental undertaking that retrieving the bell would involve, you also knew that it would be worth it to see a smile on Fluffy's face. Who wouldn't go out on a lamb for our lovable sheep?

Difficulty: A
Success: Acquire the bell at the "farm" for Fluffy's collar.
Failure: Let down your cutest and most courageous companion.
Reward: Putting a smile on Fluffy's face.

"You have got to be kidding me. Can Fluffy even smile?" Eliza asked aloud, looking around for the Hippie. He had apparently decided not to make an appearance – which was probably a good idea on his part because Eliza was ready to strangle him. How the hell was she going to retrieve a giant bell from a compound full of armed guards?

At that thought, her eyes settled back on the farm. She should have known better. Of course, this wasn't going to be a simple undertaking. Had any of the god's quests been easy? She also couldn't help but look back on her recent conversation with the Hippie from a fresh perspective. She wasn't convinced that this was a coincidence – the god must have known where she was going and that she would find the bell when she got to the farm.

That thought gave her pause, her stomach twisting and churning.

She was only undertaking this quest for Lord Baen because she had also completed the bounty for the Silver Stag – another quest that

the Hippie had sent her on. And she had only managed to slay the deer because she had access to the loot in the troll's cave. How else would she have been able to pay Evan to craft her wands?

The more she thought about it, the more the pieces began to click together in her head. She couldn't ignore the truth that was staring her in the face – or swinging from an impossibly tall-looking bell tower. She was starting to suspect that the god wasn't nearly as stupid or erratic as he looked or acted. If she was right, then the Hippie had planned all of this, and he had been pulling the strings – the very intricate strings – from the beginning.

Understandably, that didn't make her feel any better. Probably because she couldn't help but ask the next and most obvious question: where was all of this heading?

Chapter 24 - Investigatory

After fuming on the hillside for a moment, Eliza decided that she couldn't do anything about the Hippie's stupid nonsense. Besides, the guards on the compound's ramparts were likely wondering if she was a crazy person with the way she had been pacing the top of the hill muttering to herself.

Taking a deep breath, she started down toward the farm. As she neared the walls, she realized that they were nearly a dozen feet tall, the barrier constructed of coarse logs that had been embedded into the ground. The top of each pillar had been carved to a point, likely intended to deter intruders. Eliza thought it seemed excessive. She didn't expect anyone would actually be able to scale the fortifications – at least, not a human person.

A sentry stood on the ramparts above the gate and watched her carefully as she approached. From this distance, she couldn't quite make out his face or clothing in any detail, but she did notice the bow slung across his back. At least the man made no move to reach for his weapon. Perhaps a young unarmed girl carrying a crate didn't warrant much caution. She could probably use that to her advantage.

As she neared the gate, the sentry finally came into view. He wore a thick cloak that obscured his face and clothing – the thick material likely intended to blunt the sharp wind that whistled over the hills surrounding the farm.

The sentry hailed her, "Hey, there. What business do you have here, girl?"

"I-I'm an apprentice alchemist, and I was asked to deliver a shipment of healing potions to this farm," Eliza called back hesitantly, trying for her best plaintive expression. She looked around in confusion for a moment. "At least, I'm really hoping this is the right place…"

The guard cocked his head slightly in thought, and he watched her carefully. Eliza felt her stomach lurch. She didn't really have a good reason for visiting the farm, and she was going to have to rely on her "innocent alchemist" persona. She had noticed that this was starting to become a trend.

"I don't recall hearing anything about a shipment of potions," the man finally answered in a puzzled voice.

"Really?" Eliza asked, her face falling. "I traveled all this way… Maybe they gave me the wrong instructions? I hope I didn't make a wrong turn. My master is going to be furious with me for wasting an

entire day…"

The guard held up a staying hand as he noticed Eliza getting upset. "Don't worry yourself. If you're an alchemist, maybe it wouldn't hurt for you take a look at the animals. Clarice mentioned the other day that some have taken sick."

The man began pacing down the length of the ramparts. "Just give me a second."

Eliza had to suppress a victorious smile as she saw the gate begin to drift open a few moments later. Maybe she was getting better at this whole deception thing. However, she had to quickly school her expression back to something more neutral as the guard appeared in the entrance. He approached her with a carefree step, pushing back at the hood of his cloak. Eliza was forced to do a double take as she saw his face. The sentry couldn't have been more than twenty years old, with tousled auburn hair and gentle eyes.

"Hey there," the man said in greeting, offering her a hand. "My name's Brian."

Eliza just stared at his hand for a moment, before realizing that she was supposed to shake it. Then she remembered that she was still holding the crate of potions and shifted it awkwardly. "Ahh, sorry. You have your hands a bit full," Brian said with a smile. "And that looks heavy! Why don't I give you a hand?"

With that, he gently took the crate from Eliza. She wasn't expecting the movement, and she fumbled in handing it to him. A moment later, the crate tumbled to the ground, vials scattering in every direction with a loud clatter and the tinkle of glass. Eliza immediately dropped to her knees, grabbing at the vials and trying to turn over the crate. Her enhanced *Dexterity* apparently didn't cure her social awkwardness.

"I-I'm sorry," she muttered.

Yeah, okay. I'm definitely not getting better at this, she thought morosely.

Brian knelt beside her, a rumbling chuckle escaping his lips. "Don't worry. Mistakes happen." Meanwhile, he reached for the vials and helped her get everything back in order.

The only saving grace was that the majority of the potions were still intact, the thick glass absorbing most of the impact. As Eliza reached for the last potion, Brian's hand brushed hers, and she glanced up quickly. She realized that he was close. Much, much closer than she had expected. And his eyes were a brilliant brown – the color reminding her unmistakably of autumn. She caught herself staring, and she glanced down quickly. Hopefully, he hadn't noticed.

"Well, this was a good way to break the ice," Brian said with a smile. "But I didn't catch your name."

"Ahh, I-I'm sorry," Eliza murmured. "My name is Eliza."

"Well, it's a pleasure to meet you, Eliza," Brian said cordially, hefting her crate under one arm and offering her a hand up. "Why don't you follow me inside? We can go visit Clarice and let you take a look at the animals. Even if you don't have the right place, I bet she'll need to order some sort of healing tonics. Maybe that way you could bring back some good news for your master."

"T-that sounds… perfect actually. Thank you," Eliza replied, tentatively accepting his hand. The skin of his palm was calloused, and she couldn't help but marvel at the way his skin felt so real – realizing that this was one of the first times that she had actually touched someone in-game.

With that, Brian led her into the compound. Eliza's eyes widened as she stepped inside. The compound was much bigger than it had appeared from the hillside, multiple barns and farmhouses filling the interior. Dozens of people trod the dusty dirt roads between the building, attending to their chores and work. Her observation from the hillside stayed with her – this place looked more like a small town than a farm.

As they passed the center of the farm, she forced herself not to stare at the bell tower. It seemed even larger when she was standing below the structure, the tower stretching several stories into the air. The structure was built of thick boards and beams, and a heavy rope hung from the center. A ladder rested against the side of the building's frame, likely providing a way to service the top of the tower. However, even if Eliza could somehow get to the top, she had no way of retrieving the massive bell, let alone take it anywhere. It was as tall as she was.

"Stupid dumbass god," she muttered under her breath.

"What was that?" Brian asked, turning to look at her over his shoulder.

"N-nothing," Eliza stuttered. "I was just saying that this is place is huge."

"Ahh, is this your first time at Tollhouse Farm?"

"Y-yes," Eliza said. "I've never been this far outside of Falcon's Hook before."

Brian chuckled. "Well, the distance is a problem. We need to be self-sufficient out here in the middle of nowhere." He gestured at the walls. "We've also been having some trouble with the local wildlife – which is why you found me manning the walls. Some of our flock has gone missing of late, so we've been taking additional precautions."

As Brian spoke, he led Eliza deeper into the compound, heading for the northeastern part of the miniature town. A few of the other farm workers spared her a curious glance, but no one stopped to

confront them. She was beginning to wonder what Lord Baen was concerned about. Brian seemed nice, and from what she could tell, Tollhouse Farm looked like a normal farm – not that she had much experience with farms, of course.

However, she was still a bit confused about the size of the operation. As they walked through the compound, they passed what appeared to be a full-fledged smithy. The ring of hammer striking metal echoed through the air and Eliza could feel the heat of the forge as they passed. Why would a farm need a blacksmith? Maybe shoeing the animals?

She realized she had been lost in her thoughts and Brian was now glancing at her expectantly. "I'm sorry, what did you ask?"

"You seem about as out of it as me," he replied with another chuckle, his eyes flashing with humor. "I swear I was dead on my feet when I took my post this morning. Probably why I don't remember any mention of a potion delivery. But I was asking how long you've been an alchemist."

"A few weeks," Eliza replied cautiously. "I'm not really an experienced alchemist – I'm just an apprentice."

"Well, I'm just a lowly sentry," Brian said with a small smile. "So, I won't hold that against you."

Eliza wasn't really sure what to do with that, or how to respond to the friendly smile on the Brian's face. Her experience with most of the people she met in-game was that they were either only looking out for themselves or they were a little unhinged – or both. The Hippie was a perfect example. She wasn't really sure what to do with someone who just seemed genuinely nice.

She was saved from having to make small talk with Brian as the pair reached a set of pens along the northern part of the compound. Eliza could see that rough wooden fences had been constructed along the wall adjacent to a massive barn. Crates and barrels had been lined up beside the structure against the fence, and her *Inspection* ability immediately revealed that these containers held wool and lanolin.

Eliza froze as she saw a flock of sheep milling in the pen and bleating softly. Of course, they were sheep. Should she have expected anything different from the Hippie?

"Hey Clarice," Brian called out, catching the attention of a woman standing near the pens and talking to a few shepherds. She must have been in her early forties, her skin tanned from long days in the sun and rope-like muscle visible beneath the skin of her arms.

"Brian," Clarice greeted the man curtly, waving off the other shepherds as she turned her attention to the pair. "Shouldn't you be at the gate? James will skin you if he finds out you left your position… again."

Brian grimaced slightly. “Well, this time I had a good reason, at least,” he replied, gesturing at Eliza. “This is Eliza, and she comes bearing potions!”

Clarice’s forehead wrinkled in confusion as she stared at Eliza, her no-nonsense gaze making her feel uncomfortable. “I don’t recall scheduling a delivery,” she said bluntly.

“I-I might have gotten the location wrong,” Eliza stuttered, her gaze dropping to the ground under the older woman’s scrutiny.

“It didn’t seem right turning her away at the gate after she traveled such a long way and I thought I’d check with you,” Brian amended hastily. “Besides you mentioned that a few animals had taken sick…”

Clarice grunted. “You look pretty young to be an alchemist,” she said, inspecting Eliza suspiciously.

“I-I’m just an apprentice,” Eliza murmured.

“Perfect,” Clarice said sourly, glancing pointedly at Brian. “Who’s your master?”

“Alma,” Eliza offered quickly. “She is pretty well known in Falcon’s Hook…”

“Hmm, I’m familiar with her work. In that case, you might not be *entirely* useless,” the older woman grunted. “Well, when life gives you lemons… Maybe we can take advantage of your unexpected visit,” the woman said, her gaze more thoughtful now as she gazed at Eliza.

“Coming from Clarice, that’s glowing praise,” Brian said with a laugh.

This earned him the penetrating attention of the gruff woman, her eyes flicking back to the sentry. “Hmph, you better get back to your post before someone notices that you’re missing. I can take it from here.”

Brian nodded curtly and handed the crate of potions back to Eliza. His hand brushed hers once again during the exchange, and their eyes met. “You should be in good hands,” he said with a smile. “It was a pleasure to meet you, Eliza.”

“Y-you too,” Eliza murmured, but Brian had already turned and started back to the gate. She couldn’t help but watch him leave – for some reason feeling a little sad to see him go.

“Well, don’t just stand there gawking, girl,” Clarice said, snapping Eliza back to herself. “Set down your crate on that post there and I can show you the flock.”

“Okay,” Eliza said, following the older woman’s instructions. She felt strangely out of her element here – suddenly missing the quiet of Alma’s cottage and the nearby forest. It was just beginning to sink in that she was a *long* way from home, amid a bunch of strangers. Oh,

and she was also lying about why she was there.

She couldn't decide at that moment who she hated more, the Hippie or Lord Baen.

Clarice was oblivious to Eliza's inner turmoil, leading her into the pen and closing the gate behind them. The pair approached the flock of sheep milling about the enclosure. The animals seem to perk up slightly when they caught sight of Eliza and several trotted up to her, rubbing their heads against her thighs and stomach in a way that reminded her of Fluffy.

Maybe sheep just love me? she wondered. *Worst superpower ever…*

"Brian mentioned that some of the sheep were sick," Eliza ventured tentatively, looking at the animals beside her. They certainly didn't seem ill."

Clarice sighed. "That boy doesn't know the first thing about animals or medicine. It's all that James can do to keep him on the wall where he belongs. What he should have said was that we've been battling some infections. Here let me show you."

The older woman stooped and gently tugged at a sheep's leg. The animal reluctantly raised its hoof and Clarice parted the thick fur on its belly with her fingers. Eliza had to crouch to see clearly, but she could make out scratches along the animal's stomach, red skin radiating out from the injuries and indicating that the wounds were infected. Her brow furrowed in confusion as Clarice showed her that the scratches riddled the length of the sheep's stomach.

"I see the infection," Eliza murmured. "Is this the same on every sheep?" she asked, tracing one of the wounds with a gentle finger.

"Pretty much," Clarice answered bluntly. "But feel free to look for yourself."

Eliza spent some time inspecting the animals around her. Nearly every sheep in the enclosure had the same sorts of scratches along their stomach – although not all of the wounds looked infected. In some cases, the injuries were clearly fresh, the scratches not yet having scabbed over and dots of blood staining their wool.

"Do you have any idea how this happened?" Eliza asked, some of her hesitation falling away as she considered the animals.

Clarice face pinched, and she looked to the side for a brief moment. "That's not clear. The shepherds keep an eye on their flock when we take them outside the compound to graze, but it's impossible to watch every animal all of the time. Maybe they found some stickers in the hills or something," she added with a shrug.

Eliza cocked her head to the side as she listened to Clarice's explanation. She had just trudged through the hills to make it to the

farm. The underbrush was pretty sparse, and she had only witnessed tall grasses dotting the hills. Maybe a single sheep could have wandered into some strange bushes or something, but dozens? Despite Clarice's explanation, Eliza had also noticed quite a few shepherds in the hills. It seemed unlikely that a whole flock could have been injured without anyone noticing.

This is really weird, she thought, her fingers tracing another batch of scratches along a sheep's stomach. What was even more strange was that the bushy wool should have offered some protection from normal plant life.

Acting on instinct, Eliza used her *Inspection* skill on the sheep in front of her. Several portions of its wool were suddenly illuminated in blue, tracing matted lines in the hair that Eliza hadn't noticed before or had assumed were natural. The bands were evenly spaced… almost like something had been strapped to the animal.

"So, do you think you can help?" Clarice asked, interrupting her thoughts.

"I-I think so," Eliza replied hesitantly.

Thinking quickly, she realized she needed to buy herself some time to regroup with Lord Baen. Besides, she had no way to retrieve the bell in the tower looming over the town right now (if it was even possible) and she had a few choice words she needed to share with the Hippie for giving her yet another ridiculous task.

"The healing potions I brought might be partly effective," Eliza began, thinking carefully. "But they might not deal with the infection completely – only close the wounds. I'll need to speak with Alma about a better solution – maybe some sort of salve. I could return in a couple days maybe?"

As Eliza finished speaking, a prompt appeared in the air before her.

New Quest: Sheepish

The sheep at Tollhouse Farm appear to be suffering from some kind of infection caused by scratches along their stomachs. Putting aside the suspicious nature of this condition, you will need to decide whether to aid the farm. What am I saying, of course, you wool! Sheep are awesome!

Difficulty: D
Success: Return to Tollhouse Farm with a tonic or salve that will fight the infection.
Failure: Ignore this quest?

Reward: You forgot to negotiate for this, yet again.

Eliza reviewed the notice with a single raised eyebrow before swiping away the prompt. The Hippie sure seemed fond of sheep puns lately. Then she turned back to Clarice. “What do you think?” she ventured tentatively.

Clarice grunted in acknowledgment. “That may work. Just let Brian know on the way out that you’ll be heading back in a few days and I’ll alert the other sentries to keep an eye out for you. Can you make your way back to the entrance by yourself?”

“Y-yes,” Eliza replied nodding quickly.

A few minutes later, Eliza found herself standing on the hills outside of the compound. Brian hadn’t been at the gate when she returned – having been replaced by another sentry who had watched her hawkishly as she exited the compound and started the trek back to Falcon’s Hook. In contrast to Brian, the man hadn’t spoken more than two words, his mouth pinched into a grim line. She hoped that she hadn’t somehow gotten Brian in trouble by making him leave his post.

As she crested the hills ringing the compound, Eliza’s eyes returned to the farm once more and her brow furrowed in thought. Her gaze lingered on the bell tower and the pens on the north side of the farm. The Hippie’s impossible task aside, something had definitely felt off. However, she couldn’t quite place her finger on it. Maybe Lord Baen would know what to make of her observations.

Chapter 25 - Obnoxious

The walls of Falcon's Hook loomed in front of Eliza, the cracked and crumbling edges of the massive stone blocks already visible in the distance. Players and NPCs filtered along the road beside her and she tugged at her hood to hide her face. Being around this many people still made her uncomfortable – especially since she now had a *reputation*. Even if she had postponed laying her traps until things had settled down a bit, it didn't hurt to be careful.

She managed to pass through the gates with little issue. The guards only spared her a cursory glance. Eliza soon wove along the narrow, winding streets of Falcon's Hook. Dilapidated wooden buildings towered on either side of her and blotted out the harsh sunlight. As she paced down a backstreet, she saw a group of players approaching. They laughed and pushed at each other amicably – not even sparing a glance her way. However, she still pulled her cloak tighter and kept her head down.

"Ice Witch!" a voice suddenly shouted behind Eliza. "Ice Witch right here! Come and get her!" Eliza whirled, her hand clutching a wand and her free hand already moving through the gestures of *Obscuring Mist*. Yet she froze as she discovered the Hippie standing there – a shit-eating grin on his face.

"Shut up!" Eliza hissed, moving forward to cover the idiot god's mouth.

"Why? It's not like they can hear anything," he replied, waving a hand at the group of players making their way down the alley behind them.

Eliza could indeed see that the other players hadn't reacted to the Hippie's announcement, although one young woman gave Eliza a furtive glance over her shoulder, noticing the water mage gesturing animatedly at thin air. The woman shook her head and turned back to her group.

"You're a jerk," Eliza muttered and promptly turned away from the god. She needed to meet with Lord Baen, so she continued heading toward the trading house on the eastern edge of the city.

"Oh, don't be like that," the Hippie said. "See, Fluffy, some people are just so *sensitive*." This earned him a soft snort from the animal that trotted along beside the god.

"Sensitive? Because you're going around screaming about how I'm some sort of homicidal maniac," Eliza muttered, trying to keep her voice low as she saw the market approaching up ahead. There were a

ton of people around now, and she needed to avoid drawing attention to herself – even if she really wanted to start blasting the god with her *Ice Bolt*.

The Hippie shrugged. “A little bit of murder builds character, that’s what my mother always said,” the god remarked. Then he hesitated for a moment, his brow furrowing in thought. “Wait. Do I even have a mother?”

The god spun toward his pet sheep, a look of horror painted on his face. “Fluffy, I think we might be orphans!”

Eliza and Fluffy rolled their eyes at the same time, sharing a pained look. “You’re a god,” Eliza murmured, trying her best to resist the urge to start hitting said god. “You don’t have parents.”

“I’m pretty sure that still makes me an orphan,” he replied with a woeful look. “How could you be so cruel?!”

Eliza knew he was just trying to bait her, and she managed to ignore his crazy antics. If she stayed quiet, maybe he would get bored and leave – she could only hope anyway. She spent several long minutes like this as the Hippie jabbered along beside her, seemingly oblivious to the fact that she had stopped responding.

“Are you ignoring me now!?” the god suddenly demanded, sticking his face in front of hers and speaking loudly. “That’s not fair at all. In fact, it’s quite rude!”

Eliza gritted her teeth together, but she refused to acknowledge the irritating man. However, that plan didn’t exactly work out the way she intended. The god proceeded to dance and spin around her, hover his fingers in front of her face, and generally try to annoy her into lashing out at him. When all of that failed, the god abruptly decided to turn his attention elsewhere.

A shout erupted from beside Eliza, and she turned to find a group quarreling. “You stole the sword!” an NPC shouted at a player.

“I didn’t,” the player protested, his expression bewildered. “You can search me if you like!”

“It was sitting there just a moment ago,” the merchant said, whirling back to a table filled with weapons. He froze as he looked at the equipment, his brow furrowing. “It’s… it was gone a second ago… I could have sworn.”

The Hippie laughed loudly, thumping his thighs with his hands. Then he turned his attention elsewhere. All around the market, items began going missing, only to appear a few seconds later – after starting a fight, of course. The god also spent some time using tried and true tactics, such as tapping a player on the shoulder and then vanishing. Within moments, the entire market was in an uproar, and angry shouting filled the air.

“What the hell are you doing?” Eliza hissed at the god.

"Well, you were ignoring me, so I thought I'd at least have a little fun," he explained, trying for a plaintive, innocent expression. Needless to say, Eliza did not feel sympathetic.

"Fine, fine. I'll talk to you if you stop messing with people." It irked her to give into the god's antics, but it was probably better than letting him tease other people.

"How kind of you! *Anyway*, how are you coming along with my little quest?" the Hippie asked, now walking sedately beside her. "I expected you would be done *ages* ago."

"It's been like a day," Eliza said through clenched teeth.

"Really? It feels like a long time," the god replied, looking slightly confused.

Eliza's patience finally snapped, and she stabbed a finger at the god. "It's been a day. A single damn day. Putting that aside, you sent me off on a mission to recover an enormous freaking bell! What exactly do you expect me to do here?" She waved at Fluffy. "Even if I somehow managed to steal a bell the size of a tractor from a three-story bell tower, how the hell would Fluffy even be able to use it?"

The Hippie's eyes were wide as she laid into him. Yet instead of getting angry as she finished her tirade, he simply glanced at the nearby players and NPCs – many of whom were now watching Eliza as though she was crazy. From their point of view, it must look like she was yelling at the air beside her.

"You're sort of making a scene," the Hippie said, a broad smile slowly curling his lips.

Eliza struggled to tamp down on her anger, suddenly nervous that so many people were looking at her. "I hate you," she muttered before walking off at a brisk pace toward Lord Baen's trading house.

"Oh, don't be that way," the god said, hurrying to catch back up to her. "Besides, if the quest were easy, there wouldn't be any point. You told me before that you love fetch quests, so think of this as a giant fetch quest. Besides, I think Fluffy will look rather fetchi…" he began.

"Stop. No more puns," Eliza snapped. "There's a difference between challenging and impossible. The bell is several times Fluffy's size. What would he even do with it?" Eliza demanded, trying to speak under her breath to avoid drawing any more attention.

"You just leave that to me!" the Hippie said, unaffected by her angry demeanor.

Eliza was nearing the trading house, and she eyed the structure like a runner during a marathon – the finish line in her escape from the god's stupid antics. She upped her pace, walking as quickly as she could toward the building. Yet as she approached the trading house, she suddenly noticed that the god hadn't vanished, and he still trotted

along beside her with Fluffy in tow.

"What a beautiful view," the Hippie said, marveling at the bay that stretched out below the cliff's edge.

"Uh huh," Eliza replied noncommittally. "Don't you have something else you could be doing? I need to talk to Lord Baen."

The Hippie turned to look at her with a blank expression. "Nope. Our schedule is completely open. Fluffy made certain not to book anything for today – that way we could spend some quality time with you!"

"Lucky me," Eliza grumbled, glaring at the sheep – who she noticed had edged behind the god to stay out of sight.

With a sigh, she pushed open the door to the trading house. She waved at the lone clerk sitting in the nearly vacant building, but the young man barely even looked up – much less tried to block her passage. A moment later, she tapped hesitantly on the oak doors to Lord Baen's office.

"Come in!" the Lord's gravelly voice came from within the room.

Eliza spared a final glance at the Hippie. "You better behave," she whispered. This just earned her a grin from the god, and she shook her head. What was even the point? The irritating young man wasn't going to listen to her anyway.

She pushed open the door gently and stepped inside Lord Baen's office. She found the older man sitting at his desk and gazing out at the bay, his fingers drumming absently on the arm of his chair. As Eliza entered, Lord Baen turned, catching sight of her. His mouth contorted into a smile, causing the wrinkles on his face to crinkle.

"Ahh, Eliza. It's good to see you," the older man said, moving to rise and grabbing for his cane.

Eliza gestured for him to stay seated. "No need to get up on my account," she said quietly.

"Such a kind soul," the older man replied. "So, to what do I owe this visit?" he asked with a raised eyebrow.

"I…," Eliza began, hesitating as she saw the Hippie standing behind Lord Baen. The god had snatched the merchant's cane and was hobbling along the balcony behind the lord, his back crooked and imitating the older man. She grimaced, but managed to keep speaking, "I managed to visit Tollhouse Farm and wanted to report in with you."

Lord Baen's eyes lit up, and he leaned forward slightly. "Oh, really? What did you discover?"

"Well, it looks like they are herding sheep," Eliza began hesitantly, recalling her visit. "It's really more of a compound or small town than a farm. I noticed that it was surrounded by a pretty impressive wall and they maintain sentries on the ramparts."

“Interesting,” Lord Baen murmured. “Was there anything unusual?”

“Not really,” she began, noticing the lord’s expression begin to fall. “But…”

“Ahh, there was something,” he said, gesturing for her to go on.

“I’m not certain this is unusual, but many of their sheep are sick,” she explained cautiously. “They have cuts along their stomach, and some have become infected. I also noted some weird matting along their wool.”

When she saw Lord Baen’s considering expression, Eliza continued, “I’m not really sure that helps.”

“No, no, that is definitely intriguing,” the merchant explained, his hand rubbing at his chin thoughtfully. “You mentioned that their wool looked odd. Was it the sort of thing that might indicate that something had been strapped to the sheep?”

It was Eliza’s turn to be surprised. “I guess? What are you suggesting? That the sheep were carrying something? Although… that might explain the scratches on their stomach,” she murmured thinking aloud.

The Hippie had ceased his antics and was now paying close attention to the conversation. He was kneeling beside the merchant’s desk, his arms propping up his head as he glanced back and forth between Eliza and Lord Baen.

“My thoughts exactly,” the older gentleman said, smacking the table.

Lord Baen hesitated, eyeing Eliza critically. “Perhaps I should elaborate on my fears. As I mentioned to you and Alma, I suspect that Lord Cairn has been taking advantage of our ships disappearing. In fact, I believe that he is purposefully waylaying my ships and stealing our cargo – likely flying some of his own fleet under a pirate flag. However, it has proven difficult to catch him in the act. Our ships and crews never return intact, and the ready culprit is the mists around Anguine Island. And with no witnesses…” the lord trailed off, the implication of his words clear. How did you prove that someone was stealing from you in this sort of situation?

“Wouldn’t he need to load the cargo on his ships to sell it?” Eliza asked tentatively, her thoughts racing as she considered Lord Baen’s predicament. “That might give you a way to catch him.”

“Exactly my thought as well,” the merchant replied with a nod. “However, my spies have been watching the docks closely for weeks now and have seen no sign of our missing cargo arriving in port – much of which is emblazoned with our house crest.”

Lord Baen grimaced before continuing, “If our goods aren’t being delivered to the docks, that either means that Lord Cairn isn’t

responsible for the loss of our ships – which I highly doubt – or, he has found some way to unload the cargo further up the coast, repackage it, and then transport the merchandise to Falcon's Hook so that he can deliver it to one of his regular trading partners."

Eliza's thoughts raced as she considered Lord Baen's story. If he was right, then the farm might be a front for delivering the stolen cargo. Perhaps the "farmers" were actually loading the cargo on the sheep and using them to transport the merchandise to Falcon's Hook. The sheep's fluffy wool would likely conceal the goods, and no one would think to stop and search a group of shepherds. Eliza could see the Hippie's smile widen as he watched Eliza and listened to Lord Baen's story.

"I can see that you have caught on to my suspicion," Lord Baen said, also observing Eliza carefully. "If Tollhouse Farm is a front, then Lord Cairn is using it to smuggle goods into the city. That would also be consistent with the armed guards and the injuries to the sheep that you have observed."

"What do you plan to do then?" Eliza asked cautiously. She was beginning to suspect that she may have just inadvertently started a war between the two trading houses. With their significant presence and influence within the city, this likely wouldn't end well. She had been in Falcon's Hook long enough to understand how much the city relied on the trade and work provided by the two houses.

"Don't worry, I don't plan to start fighting in the streets," Lord Baen said, waving his hand. "That would not benefit my house – especially with our already waning resources. No, we need to strike in a more… *discrete* fashion."

Lord Baen gazed at Eliza evenly, his eyes piercing. "In fact, I believe you may be able to help me with this task."

"M-me?" Eliza asked in confusion.

"Yes, you," Lord Baen said, arching a single eyebrow. "After our last visit and your retrieval of the stag's pelt, I was curious to discover how a novice alchemist had achieved such a feat."

Eliza could feel the bottom drop out of her stomach, and she tried her best to school her face into a neutral expression. This wasn't good at all, and the widening grin on the Hippie's face wasn't making her feel any better.

"It seems that a large number of travelers and townsfolk have had a run in with this so-called *Ice Witch*," the Lord continued. "Yet this 'witch' only appears to have surfaced recently, and his – or her – traps seem to be centered around the forest the Silver Stag was known to frequent."

The lord leaned forward. "Now, it's interesting that a young woman managed to not only slay the creature and avoid the other

travelers that were searching for the stag – but also seemed to have no difficulty with this Ice Witch or her traps. In fact, one might even begin to suspect that you and this Ice Witch were one and the same person."

"I-I…" Eliza began, struggling to form a response. She had never been much good at lying or improvising on the spot.

"He seems to be on to you," the Hippie observed, his voice startling Eliza. She spared a glare at the god before managing to control her expression.

Yeah, no shit, she thought in irritation.

"But, I'm not a man who places much stock in rumors," Lord Baen said, waving a hand and sitting back in his chair. "What the travelers do among themselves is not my affair. And I certainly don't mind that we have a witch in residence in the local forest. If anything, it adds some mystique to our quaint little city. I just hope that nothing happens that might reveal her presence prematurely…"

"Ahh, the cagey old coot…" the Hippie remarked, nodding in appreciation. He pointed at the older man. "Greenmail! Wait… no, that's not right. "Yellowmail maybe? What does mail have to do with threatening someone anyway? Maybe they poison the envelope…" he grumbled in frustration.

Eliza had also picked up on the subtext of the lord's message: *help me or I reveal who you are*. It seemed she had little choice but to play along. Not that she had any clue what she would be able to do to put a stop to Lord Cairn's scheme.

"T-that would be unfortunate," Eliza managed to squeak out, her stomach shifting uncomfortably. "How exactly do you feel I could help you?"

A sly smile curled Lord Baen's lips. "Ahh, well, it would be convenient if something were to happen at Tollhouse Farm that put a stop to Lord Cairn's illicit business – permanently. If you understand my meaning, of course."

Eliza's eyes widened, her thoughts turning to Brian and Clarice. It was possible that the farm was being used to smuggle goods, but the evidence was circumstantial at best. Even if they were somehow complicit in some sort of theft, they had also seemed like nice people. Was Lord Baen asking her to… kill them?

"What exactly are you suggesting?" she asked nervously.

Lord Baen waved a hand. "Nothing too untoward. We don't need to cause any unnecessary collateral damage. I only need the flow of stolen goods to stop. I would be happy to leave the details up to you."

As the lord finished speaking, a quest notification appeared in front of Eliza.

Quest Update: Merchant's Quandary

After identifying some suspicious activity at Tollhouse Farm, and returning to Lord Baen with this information, the older gentleman informed you that he believes that the farm is being used to smuggle stolen goods. Lord Baen was also *kind* enough to not-so-subtly blackmail you into putting a stop to this activity. Always the gracious host, the lord has seen fit to let you get creative in how you plan to accomplish this goal. Aren't you grateful? You should probably be grateful.

Difficulty: A
Success: Put a stop to the flow of contraband goods.
Failure: Ignore Lord Baen's thinly-veiled threat.
Reward: Avoid having Lord Baen reveal that you are the one who has been killing the local townspeople and players for fun. Yay?

Eliza's gaze darted back and forth between Lord Baen and the quest prompt, her stomach a roiling mass of indecision. Not that she really had much choice in the matter. Her worry aside, she couldn't afford to let the lord reveal her secret identity or what she had been doing to the players. If she did, she knew that her name might be the next one listed on a bounty board.

"Well, the plot thickens," the Hippie announced loudly, clapping his hands and causing Eliza to start. "What do you plan to do?"

Eliza just shook her head, her finger hovering over the accept button. She had no idea how she was going to pull this off or retrieve the god's stupid bell. However, she was now backed into a corner with no way out. There was nowhere to go but forward.

Taking a deep breath, Eliza bit her lip and hit accept.

Chapter 26 - Delinquent

As Eliza stepped inside her family's home, the AI – registering the presence of her core – immediately turned on the hallway lights. After her meeting with Lord Baen, she had logged off for the night. At that point, she was unable to deal with the Hippie's antics and didn't want to risk being blackmailed by yet another NPC.

Her day at school had been exactly the same as the hundreds before it – mind-numbing boredom interspersed with a few delightful moments of awkwardness. However, at least her classes had given her plenty of time to dwell on her two impossible quests. She somehow needed to steal a massive bell from a compound of armed guards that were likely smuggling stolen merchandise into Falcon's Hook. On top of that, Lord Baen was expecting her to stop the smuggling operation – strongly implying that she ought to kill everyone or destroy the farm. Or both.

He had been a little vague.

Eliza threw her bag down on the kitchen table in frustration and decided to make herself a snack. She wasn't exactly anxious to log back into AO since she had no idea what she was going to do to accomplish her quests. No brilliant idea had suddenly occurred to her during the day, and her thoughts kept spinning in an endless circle.

As she took a seat at the kitchen counter, still deep in thought, a chime resounded through the house. The AI promptly spoke up, "Incoming message for Eliza."

"Show me," Eliza ordered in a tired voice. It was probably just junk mail.

A screen flickered into existence beside her, and an email immediately came into view. Eliza's hand froze halfway to her mouth, her knuckles white around her fork. "Oh shit," she muttered, a heavy weight settling in her stomach and her appetite fleeing quickly. Her worries about the game were now forgotten – replaced with a new problem.

Her grade report for the previous month was on the screen. It was the usual series of "A's" but one digit seemed out of place and held her rapt attention. She had made a "B" in English? Her first reaction was anger. Ms. Jones had probably given her a poor grade on her recent paper. The woman seemed to have it out for her in particular and kept giving her low marks in her class.

Who needs to learn creative writing anyway? How can you even grade a short story? she thought angrily. The whole thing was entirely

subjective – not that her parents were likely to understand that. That thought made the writhing mass in her stomach clench. Her mother was going to be livid…

As though her thoughts had summoned them, Eliza heard the front door open, and the sound of her parents' voices drifted down the hallway. She frantically swiped away the email, hoping that the school had delayed sending the same report to her parents. She wasn't exactly optimistic – especially not with her luck lately.

Her parents entered the kitchen a moment later. "Hello, Eliza," her father said in greeting, dropping onto the stool beside her. "How was your day?"

"Umm, good," she mumbled in reply, breathing an internal sigh of relief. Maybe they hadn't received the email yet. They would have started in immediately on the nagging if they had seen the grade report.

"Well, I'm jealous," her mother replied, making her way around the kitchen in search of a snack of her own. "Our day was just terrible. The clinic was swamped."

Her father nodded tiredly. "It seems there is no limit to people's imagination. They constantly surprise me with the new and stupid ways that they manage to hurt themselves."

"What was it today?" Eliza asked cautiously, hoping to keep the subject on her parents' work. That was always a safe area.

"Where should I start? We had one guy that managed to nail his hand to a board," her father explained in an exasperated voice. "How he did that, I have no idea. He would have had to shoot the nail gun over top of his hand…"

Her father stopped speaking as a familiar chime resounded through the room, signaling another incoming email. Eliza could feel her breath catch in her throat, and she closed her eyes, already dreading the conversation that she knew was coming. Of course, this had to happen on a day that both of her parents were in a bad mood.

"Eliza, what is this?" her mother asked a moment later, her voice eerily steady.

For a second, Eliza considered not opening her eyes. Maybe she could feign her own death – or perhaps a heart attack. Yet she quickly realized that probably wouldn't work since she was sitting in a room with two doctors.

She grudgingly opened her eyes to see her mother and father staring at her expectantly. Her mother's hands rested on her hips, and the toe of her shoe tapped ominously against the kitchen floor. Beside them hovered a screen showing the grade report, the lone B standing out like a sore thumb among the other grades.

"I got a B," Eliza mumbled.

"We can see that," her mother retorted in a dry voice. "What happened?"

"I-I think the teacher has it out for me," Eliza tried to explain. "She had us write a short story… and I couldn't think of anything interesting."

Her mother grimaced. "This isn't the time for your grades to be slipping. I'm sure if you had more time and you weren't distracted with that *game*, you would have managed to write a better paper."

"It's just one assignment," Eliza replied in a quiet voice. "And it's only English."

Her mother didn't seem convinced by Eliza's half-hearted defense as she continued ranting, "A doctor still needs to know how to write – even if the subject isn't covered on the medical school entrance exams. I have to write reports all the time!"

Her mother tapped her lips in thought for a moment. "I think I know a tutor in town that specializes in writing. He might be able to help…" her mother trailed off, swiping at the Core on her wrist and skimming through her contact list.

Eliza spared a pleading look at her father, hoping he might be able to step in. He was usually the calmer of the two. He seemed to pick up on her unspoken plea. "I think that might be a bit much," he suggested tentatively. "It really is only one paper. I'm sure Eliza can raise her grade next month or ask for some extra credit."

Her mother glanced up sharply. "This is indicative of a larger problem. We need to nip this in the bud." She hesitated for a moment. "Either Eliza is struggling with the assignments or her attention is split. Or both."

"It's not the game," Eliza squeaked, suddenly fearful as she followed her mother's train of thought. The prospect of not being able to play AO – to not see Alma again or work in her digital garden – was terrifying. Even with the Hippie and Lord Baen's irritating quests, the game was her only haven against the endless tide of schoolwork and studying.

"Really?" her mother demanded. "You spend every waking moment plugged into that headset – time that could be better spent studying. Besides, I'm not sure I agree with the current reports showing that there are no ill effects from extended play."

"Come on, honey," Eliza's father interjected, noticing Eliza's expression. "We went through all of that when we bought the equipment, and we agreed it was safe."

"Comprehensive studies on the neural interface are still rather scarce, and most that do exist are funded by Cerillion Entertainment," her mother reported. "Besides, Eliza's grades would suggest that the game may have some unforeseen side effects."

Eliza could feel her anger threatening to boil over, feeding off the frustrations she had already been struggling with all day. They always did this – talked about her like she wasn't there. Decided her future for her as if she was just some sort of robot that would follow along blindly. Honestly, the Hippie and Lord Baen weren't any better – forcing or blackmailing her to do what they wanted. No one ever seemed to care what she thought or what she wanted to do.

"It was a single grade," Eliza finally snapped, interrupting her parents. Her sharp comment immediately drew their attention. With their gaze fixed on her, she suddenly realized she may have overstepped, and her anger faltered.

"See, and now she's acting out!" her mother said, glaring at her husband. "Is this the sort of behavior you want to encourage – poor grades and backtalk?"

Her father opened his mouth, but Eliza interjected – anger flooding her veins with renewed vigor at her mother's comment. This was completely unreasonable. How could they blame this on the game? It was just one paper. "It has nothing to do with the game," Eliza insisted, her frustration giving her courage. "It was just a dumb assignment."

"We don't get to pick which assignments we give our full effort – just as we don't get to pick our patients. What if your father didn't give his emergency patients his full attention, or he tried to rationalize doing shoddy work? People would die," her mother insisted, her eyes flashing.

"T-this isn't a life or death situation," Eliza retorted, trying her best to keep her voice even, but she could still feel her voice quaver. "This was a paper for a stupid high school creative writing class…"

"So you're saying that you intentionally slacked off?" her mother demanded. "That isn't the daughter I know, and this wasn't a problem before you started playing that *game*."

"This isn't because of the game!" Eliza practically shouted. She could feel frustrated tears blooming at the corners of her eyes. "How many times do I have to say that? If you would only listen to me for a second instead of lecturing me, you'd understand that!"

"Eliza Zhao, I will not have you speak to me in that tone," her mother snapped. "I have no idea what has gotten into you, but this is completely unacceptable."

"Why don't we just cool off a little," Eliza's father interjected. "I'm not sure we're getting anywhere here." Her mother opened her mouth to say something, and Eliza's father held up a hand. "Just hear me out.

"It does sound like this was a single paper for a single class – one that doesn't affect Eliza's entrance grades." Her father anticipated

her mother's next argument. "Or her GPA if she goes back to Ms. Jones and asks for extra credit."

Her father rounded on Eliza. "But that doesn't change the fact that you have been spending a lot of time in that game. And this is the first time you've made a 'B' in well… a long time," he said, faltering slightly as he tried to recall the last time his daughter had made anything other than an 'A.' "We had intended for AO to be a momentary reprieve from your studies, not a replacement."

"But…," Eliza began, dread clenching in her stomach. Were they going to take the game away from her?

Her father gestured for her to wait. "On the other hand, it does at least give you an outlet and something else to think about besides studying. You've seemed much happier since you started playing – you even seem excited when you talk about it," he said, sparing a meaningful look at his wife. "So I suggest a compromise. If you can bring up your English grade next month, then you can keep playing. But you need to scale back on AO when your entrance exams come up in the next few weeks."

He looked between both women, noting that their anger had faded slightly, and they were at least considering his suggestion. "Does that sound reasonable?"

Eliza spared a glance at her mother and saw grudging acknowledgment in her eyes. "And the tutor…" her mother began.

"I'm not sure we need another tutor for Eliza," her father said quickly. "Why don't we give her a chance to turn around the grade herself. She also needs to learn to tackle her own problems."

After a moment's consideration, her mother nodded curtly. "Fine. But if I don't see your grades go up next month, we're tossing out that headset. And I expect you to devote your full attention to your exams." With that, Eliza's mother stormed out of the kitchen, ensuring that she had the final word on the subject.

"T-thank you," Eliza softly to her father as her mother retreated.

This earned her a sigh. "Your mother really does have your best interests in mind – even if it doesn't seem like it sometimes," he replied quietly, watching Eliza. She could see the lingering concern in his eyes. Likely her own tirade had come as a shock to him – just as it had with her mother.

"Are you okay?" he ventured.

"I-I'm fine," Eliza said, her gaze fixed on the plate in front of her.

Yet she didn't quite believe her own words. Was she really okay? It felt like so much had changed in such a short period of time. Only a week ago, she wouldn't have dared to confront her mother that

way. She had practically screamed at her…

Maybe the game really was to blame. But she didn't want to give it up – she couldn't. She had grown quite fond of her in-game garden and the people she had met. Well, maybe not the Hippie or Lord Baen, but the thought of losing Alma was almost painful. She also couldn't help but recall the triumphant feeling of finally defeating the troll and the players. The way the players whispered about the Ice Witch. Brian's kind eyes. It felt like she would be giving up some piece of herself.

Eliza looked up at her father, repeating herself more forcefully, "I'm fine, but I guess I need to go study," she added quickly, grabbing her plate and making her escape from the kitchen.

Behind Eliza's back, her father's gaze rested on her fleeing form, his brow furrowed in concern. "I sure hope so," he murmured, but his words didn't reach Eliza.

Chapter 27 - Despairing

Waning sunlight filtered through the shuttered windows of Alma's secret laboratory, indicating that it was nearly nightfall. Eliza sat at her workbench, her brow furrowed in concentration as she stared at the small glass vial resting on the table. Her hand wiped at the sweat beading on her forehead, her concentration never breaking.

Taking a deep breath and moving with exaggerated care, Eliza picked up a nearby petri dish and used a glass utensil to gingerly slide the mold on its surface into the mixture – being careful not to touch it with her bare skin. She held her breath as she watched the contents absorb the mold before slowly changing color.

Green.

Yellow.

Then the mixture settled on a water-like consistency and opacity, signaling that she had failed. Again.

Eliza just stared at the vial for a long moment. She had lost count of how many times she had tried to brew a new paralytic poison using the Carnivore Mold. Frustration boiled and frothed in veins. It was starting to look impossible – just like the Hippie's quest. And Lord Baen's stupid task. And her parents' bottomless expectations.

With a sudden jerk of her hand, Eliza swiped the table, scattering the contents across the lab. Vials and circular dishes crashed against the ground to the sound of glass shattering. Amid the echoing crash, Eliza just sat there, her thoughts a chaotic whirlwind. The only thing that broke through the tempest was the aching in her hand, which just served to make even angrier. Nothing ever seemed to work out in her favor.

"I heard a crash…" Alma spoke up from behind Eliza. "Oh, what happened in here?"

Eliza forced herself to take a deep breath, trying to quiet her raging heartbeat. "I-I'm sorry," she muttered, her face sinking into her hands. "I just got frustrated. I'll clean it up and replace what I've broken."

"Hmm. I'm not too worried about a bit of broken glass," the older woman replied calmly stepping up beside the table and taking a seat across from Eliza. "I'm more concerned about why you felt those vials needed to be obliterated."

Eliza ventured a glance at Alma, only to see a slight grin curling her wrinkled lips. "It's just… everything," she muttered.

"That's a bit vague. Although, I suppose you don't have to

worry about telling me specifics. At my age, I'm bound to forget anyway," Alma replied, her smile widening.

"It's the Hippie and my family. Oh, and Lord Baen blackmailed me into helping him with his stupid squabble with Lord Cairn," Eliza said, rubbing at her eyes.

"Lord Baen did what?" Alma demanded, anger coloring her voice.

Eliza looked up in surprise. This was the first time she had ever heard Alma sound upset. "He indicated that he knew that I was the Ice Witch, and he then implied that he would reveal that information if I didn't come up with some way to stop Lord Cairn from smuggling stolen goods through that farm to the north."

"Mischievous bastard," Alma muttered, her eyes flitting to the vials along the wall. "I wonder how we should kill him… A poison targeting the nervous system would be my preference. That way he will still be conscious at the end." She sighed. "Although, it probably wouldn't work. He's always been spineless."

"I doubt killing him would do any good anyway," Eliza murmured, not finding any humor in Lord Baen's death at the moment. "It would probably just start a war and create a power vacuum in the city. Things don't seem to be going too well between the two houses as it is."

"Well, a woman can still dream," Alma replied bitterly. "Maybe just a lingering illness? Something targeting the reproductive system perhaps… She hesitated for a moment, shaking her head before continuing, "Moving on. I'm not sure I can help with the family issues, but what is our idiot god up to now?"

"He wants me to steal a massive bell from the same farm," Eliza groaned into her hands. "Except I have no idea how to accomplish that feat. It's in a bell tower a few stories off the ground, it must be nearly five feet across, and it probably weighs a ton."

"That seems… challenging," Alma replied cautiously. "Sorry, I'm drawing a blank on how to steal a giant bell."

"Trust me, I get it," Eliza muttered. "I haven't come up with any great ideas either."

She glanced to the side, her eyes focusing on the glass shards littering the floor. She had briefly considered using some sort of flammable oil. If she burned down Tollhouse Farm, that would make short work of the tower. However, that plan had some obvious problems. How would she place the barrels of oil? How would she light them? How would she get the bell back to Alma's compound? How would she deal with the guards at the farm – which she would prefer to avoid killing? Brian and Clarice had seemed nice… well, Brian had seemed nice at least. In any event, fire didn't seem like a

great strategy.

As she followed the trail of glass that ran along the floor, Eliza noticed something strange. A filmy gray substance was slowly crawling its way up the leg of a nearby workbench. As she watched, the mold ate into the wood gradually, the organic matter feeding the insidious fungus and furthering its growth. However, its progress was stymied by a metal band around the base of the leg, which limited its ability to keep devouring the wood.

As she watched the Carnivore Mold work, the tantalizing whisper of an idea flitted through Eliza's mind. "Okay, this is going to seem like a weird question," Eliza began slowly. "Is there a way to mutate or change the growth pattern of certain plants?"

Alma cocked her head, following Eliza gaze to the mold. A brief smile flashed across the woman's face. "Ahh, I see. Yes, it's possible, although it requires Intermediate proficiency in Herbalism to learn the skill."

With a quick gesture, Eliza opened her Character Status and skill menu.

Character Status			
Name:	Eliza	**Gender:**	Female
Level:	73	**Class:**	Water Mage
Race:	Human	**Alignment:**	True-Neutral
Fame:	0	**Infamy:**	4200
Health:	860	**H-Regen:**	2.30/Sec
Mana:	1810	**M-Regen:**	19.00/Sec
Stamina	860	**S-Regen:**	5.00/Sec
Str:	40	**Dex:**	40
Vit:	50	**End:**	50
Int:	105	**Will:**	105

Affinities			
Dark:	5%	**Light:**	4%
Fire:	2%	**Water:**	23%
Air:	2%	**Earth:**	9%

She had continued to level from her remaining traps in the nearby forest, although she hadn't renewed them lately and her progress had begun to slow. She felt a pang of guilt as she looked at her level-up notifications, but she couldn't ignore the fact that this was an easy way to gain experience and money. With a swipe of her hand, she shifted to her skill list, noticing that her Herbalism skill was currently at Intermediate Level 2.

"I should be able to learn the new ability," Eliza said, turning her attention back to Alma.

The older woman smiled slightly. "Good, the technique itself is rather simple but requires detailed knowledge of the plant you are trying to manipulate." She stood and walked to the other side of the lab, retrieving a small potted plant. As she returned, Eliza could see that it was a Calypsis Leaf – a basic catalyst.

Alma set the plant on the workbench. "Now watch closely," she instructed.

The older woman's hand hovered over the plant, lingering only a few inches away. Eliza noticed that Alma's eyes turned a solid sapphire as she channeled her mana, small droplets of energy accumulating along and clinging to the skin of her finger. As the mana grew, a single drop broke away and splashed against a leaf.

Eliza stared in disbelief as she watched the energy course through the plant, staining the veins a brilliant blue. New shoots immediately began to arch away from the plant, stretching into the air as leaves sprouted along new stalks. A moment later, blooms had appeared among the branches – the plant doubling in size as she watched.

"The growth effect is relative to the mana you imbue into the plant and its natural resources," Alma explained, her mana receding and her eyes shifting back to a normal color.

"Natural resources?" Eliza echoed in confusion.

Alma nodded. "See how this plant was constrained by the pot? That limits its growth. We are just accelerating natural growth, which means that the same soil nutrients and moisture must also be present." The alchemist ran her fingers along the soil of the pot and Eliza could

now see that it was bone-dry.

"So, there are limitations…" she murmured.

"Indeed," Alma nodded, eyeing her with a knowing expression. "The mana infusion must also be maintained continuously to accelerate the growth."

"It's still amazing," Eliza whispered, staring at the plant and itching to try this new skill.

"I thought you might like it," Alma replied with a soft chuckle. "Here, let me show you how it works." As she finished speaking, the older woman placed a finger to Eliza's forehead, a trickle of mana tingling her skin.

A moment later, the requisite gestures flooded Eliza's mind, and a notification appeared on her system UI.

> **New Spell: Accelerated Growth**
> Your knowledge of Herbalism and your growing affinity with water mana enable you to accelerate the growth of certain plants. This skill must be channeled to maintain the effect. At higher levels, this ability can be used to create entire gardens at will – assuming you have suitable conditions and the requisite plants. Someone could even say that you now have a blue thumb for this sort of work…
> **Skill Level:** Beginner Level 1
> **Effect:** Accelerated plant growth. The growth rate increases with your skill level.
> **Cost:** 100 mana/second.

"This is fantastic," Eliza murmured as she reviewed the skill notification, ignoring the stupid joke. "Thank you, Alma."

"Don't mention it," the older woman replied evenly. "Maybe you can find some use for the skill given your current predicament."

With that, the alchemist rose, grabbing her cane and heading for the exit. As she neared the door, Alma hesitated and turned back to Eliza. "Just be careful, girl. I have a bad feeling about these quests you're tackling."

Eliza met her gaze, seeing the concern in the older woman's eyes. She remembered clearly what had happened the last time she had experimented – including the reputation she had garnered around Falcon's Hook. Her traps might have allowed her to level quickly, but they had also allowed Lord Baen to blackmail her and forced her to hide her new, infamous persona. Her ideas seemed to have unforeseen consequences.

"Don't worry, I'll be careful," Eliza said solemnly.

With that, the older woman left the lab and Eliza turned her attention back to the nearby workbench, where the Carnivore Mold was still trying vainly to eat away at the table leg. Despite Alma's words of caution, Eliza couldn't help the small excited smile that crept across her face as she considered what she was about to attempt next.

This was going to be interesting at the very least.

Chapter 28 - Inventive

Eliza stared at the small petri dish resting on the workbench. She had placed a Carnivore Mold culture on top of the dish and was now preparing to try her new *Accelerated Growth* spell. Taking a deep breath, she channeled her mana. Power immediately rushed through her veins in a river, and she instinctively funneled the energy toward her fingertip. She watched, mesmerized, as a single drop of mana formed along her finger and then dripped down onto the mold.

She held her breath expectantly. However, as the seconds passed, nothing happened.

Eliza frowned, a confused flurry of thoughts whipping through her head. Had she messed up the spell somehow? Or maybe the mold was resistant to the growth spell? She looked back at the prompt, wondering if maybe she wasn't experienced enough to cast the spell. However, at this stage, she was now intimately familiar with the mold, so that didn't seem likely.

As she stared back and forth between the potted plant that Alma had used as an example and the mold culture, it suddenly occurred to her what she was missing. Eliza felt like face-palming. She hadn't given the mold anything to feed on!

She leaped up from her chair and raced to the other side of the room, returning a moment later with a few of the pellets that she used to feed the rabbits. She dropped a single pellet in the middle of the mold culture, watching as the substance clung to the organic matter and began to feed on it slowly.

Taking another breath, she then repeated the spell. This time, the mold responded as soon as the glowing blue drop splashed against its surface. The mold grew at an alarming pace, immediately covering the pellet and expanding to fill the entire dish. Eliza quickly canceled the spell as she saw that the mold would soon overgrow its little enclosure.

"Whatcha doing?" a voice suddenly spoke up near her shoulder.

Eliza let out an alarmed squeak and promptly fell off of her stool, landing heavily on the floor. The Hippie's smiling face loomed over her, his head cocked to the side inquisitively.

"No need to get up on my account," he said with some amusement.

Fluffy trotted into view a moment later, sniffing at Eliza with a compassionate expression.

Groaning softly, she managed to push herself back to a sitting

position – sparing a moment to glare daggers at the irritating god. "You don't need to pop into existence right beside me like that," she muttered.

He waved a hand. "I don't much like walking – or doors for that matter. Never really saw the point myself. Although, some of my siblings like to put on airs and act all mortal. Different strokes I suppose."

Resisting the urge to throw the mold culture in his stupid, smiling face, Eliza pulled herself to her feet and retook her seat at the workbench. "What are you here for anyway?" she demanded.

"I'm just a bit bored," the Hippie replied, pacing around the laboratory and inspecting the vials lined up against the wall. He would pick up a container, sniff at its contents or dab a finger inside before placing it back on the shelf. Eliza briefly considered warning him that some of the ingredients were deadly, but then paused. Maybe he would kill himself… wouldn't that be a pleasant surprise?

The Hippie glanced over at Eliza. "But you never answered my question. What're you up to?"

Seeing that the ingredients didn't seem to be affecting the god, Eliza sighed in disappointment. "I'm trying to see if I can create… well, a living weapon I guess."

"Oh really?" the Hippie asked, his voice sounding more excited. In a flash, he was standing beside Eliza. "What are we making? Fire-breathing ants? Armor-plated wolves? Flying, poison-spitting spiders?"

Eliza just shook her head, gesturing at the petri dish. "Not quite. More like a carnivorous mold?"

"Is it supposed to be pink?" the Hippie asked in confusion. "Oh, I get it! That's to throw off your enemies or lure them into a false sense of security!"

"It's not pink…" Eliza began and then trailed off as she looked back at the dish and saw the bright pink mold that now rested on the surface. "What? How is that possible?" she murmured.

Her thoughts were racing as she inspected the dish more carefully. Had she contaminated the sample somehow? Or maybe the pellet contained a dye? Except she knew the pellets were little more than a mash of baked grain – she had helped Alma prepare them herself. So there had to be some other explanation.

"Maybe it's just a fluke," the Hippie suggested, peering at the mold from a few inches away. "A rather charming accident, though. You could accessorize your living weapons to go with your outfit. Oh, or you could create different product lines and open a little shop! Eliza's Rainbow Rot!"

"Shut up," Eliza snapped at the god, and he gave her a wounded expression, clutching at his heart before dropping to the

ground as though he had died. “I’m trying to think,” she explained, ignoring his antics. As always, the Hippie wasn’t here to help, he was just distracting her, and yet…

Something the god had said stuck with her. He had mentioned an accident. Eliza couldn’t help but recall her biology lectures from earlier that week. She had been a bit distracted by being put on the spot. What had her teacher been droning on about?

“Microevolution,” she murmured to herself as the memory finally came back to her.

“Micro-what?” the Hippie asked, sitting up suddenly.

“In my world, plants and animals evolve naturally over time,” Eliza explained as she prepped another dish. There was only one way to test her theory. “Most big evolutionary changes happen over time – sometimes resulting in entirely new species. Like primates evolving into homo sapiens.

“However, some evolution can happen much more quickly within a single species,” Eliza continued, settling the new dish on the workbench. “Sometimes changes can even be seen within a few generations. Certain types of organisms are more susceptible to this – especially things like bacteria that reproduce very rapidly.”

“I think…” Eliza said, beginning to channel her mana and watching as a single drop of sapphire mana welled at the tip of her finger. The droplet splashed against the new mold culture a moment later. The mold expanded at a rapid rate, devouring another pellet. Eliza held her breath waiting for… something.

“Umm, so were we expecting yellow this time?” the Hippie asked.

Eliza ignored him, staring at the dish. A moment later, an object began to form in the mold. It looked remarkably like a leaf, and it tilted and twisted until its surface was pointed at the nearby window. An excited grin crept across Eliza’s face. Now this was incredible.

“I think that by accelerating the growth of the mold, I’m triggering some sort of microevolution,” Eliza finally said in a distracted voice. “If this place operates in the same way as my world, the cells must be replicating at an amazing rate – with unusual mutations as the result. Like the pink color and that thing that looks like a leaf.”

“Oookay,” the Hippie said slowly. “So how does this help?”

“You’ll see,” Eliza replied quickly, already starting her preparations.

She set to work gathering dozens of the glass petri dishes and prepping the cultures for the application of her *Accelerated Growth*. She used a few of the dishes as control samples, placing a single pellet

in the center of the dish. With others, she tried something different. If she was right and the game was essentially replicating some type of microevolution, she could probably achieve different results if she intentionally introduced specific mutagens into the mix – something to encourage a certain evolutionary path.

Fumbling around with a few different options, Eliza added more pellets to one culture. She added various ingredients to the others – simple and more complex mixtures of the plants and powders lingering around the room. She was careful to label each culture with the specific set of ingredients she had introduced so that she could keep track.

As she was walking around the lab, Eliza noticed a batch of small mana crystals lying off to the side. She had never really used the crystals before, but she had seen Alma utilize them on occasion. The older alchemist sometimes used them when brewing complicated potions, dissolving the crystals slowly to add mana or water to a mixture or crushing them suddenly to inject water into the brewing apparatus.

"This might be interesting," she said to herself grabbing a few of the crystals and adding them to a petri dish.

Finally, she surveyed her work. Dozens of cultures were spread across every available surface in the lab. It would be a royal pain in the ass to clean everything up, but this should give her a ton of feedback in a short period of time.

However, as she glanced around the room, Eliza couldn't help but feel like something was off. It took her a moment to realize that the Hippie had disappeared. He must have gotten bored during her experimental fugue and gone off to pester some other poor person. On the other hand, at least he wasn't there touching everything and ruining her samples. With a shrug, she pulled up the in-game system console and created a new worksheet. She was going to need to plug in each culture with its own reference number and ingredient composition and then record the results.

"This is going to take a while," Eliza murmured.

In fact, it took a few hours.

When Eliza finally came back up for air, the sun had long since set, and the laboratory was illuminated solely by flickering candlelight. Her cultures spanned the entire lab, their surfaces covered in a panoply of substances – only some of which resembled the original gray mold.

A few of the spores had merely changed color, picking up on the dyes and natural coloring in the mutagens she had added to the dishes. Others had undergone more dramatic changes. Half-formed leaves adorned more than one dish. One of the cultures had mutated

to form spindly, almost animal-like limbs that stretched toward other sources of organic matter. A few of the cultures had actually managed to move, and she had been forced to terminate those cultures by tossing them into the nearby fire.

That had been a little nerve-wracking…

Now Eliza's attention was focused on one culture in particular. This mold pulsed with a dull blue glow and she had transferred it from its original small petri dish to a much larger glass plate. She had added one of the water mana crystals to the culture along with some Calypsis Leaf. The mold had absorbed the material and the organic matter in the pellet and now throbbed with an eerie light. However, that wasn't what was truly interesting.

Eliza's hand hovered over the plate, a single pellet suspended in her hand. She took a deep breath and then dropped it. As soon as the pellet struck the glowing mold, the material seemed to ripple and contorted, blossoming in size as it devoured the organic matter at an incredible rate – growing at a speed she had only witnessed when she was channeling *Accelerated Growth*. In a matter of seconds, it had filled the entire plate. Then it stopped as it ran out of organic material to feed upon.

She inspected the mold, and her eyes widened in shock.

> **Carnivorous Mold (Mutant Variant)**
> This mold has mutated under prolonged exposure to water mana, absorbing local mutagens and allowing the fungus to naturally accelerate its own growth. The growth scale is currently unknown, but preliminary observations suggest that that the rate of cellular reproduction may be relative to available consumable organic matter and the size of the initial spore culture. Further study is required to reveal additional information.

Eliza couldn't help but stare at the notification. There was still plenty of work to do to determine the growth rate of the mold and its limitations, but she could still feel excitement bubbling in her chest. Unlike using some sort of flammable oil, a swiftly growing fungus might address all of her problems. It would likely be easy to conceal and wouldn't require her to ignite or start a fire. Most importantly, it offered plausible deniability, and it would likely grow slowly enough to allow the residents of the farm to evacuate.

"This might just work," Eliza murmured, shadows flickering across her face and painting her excited grin in a manic, almost

macabre light. She would need to run some additional experiments, but her tentative plan was beginning to look like it might not fail horribly. What could go wrong?

Chapter 29 - Surreptitious

Eliza shifted uncomfortably from her perch atop the wagon. After she had agreed to brew the next batch of healing potions for Alma's local customers, the alchemist had grudgingly allowed Eliza to borrow her wagon and mare. It had taken Eliza some time to figure out how to guide the old horse – who she had lovingly named "Shithead." She wasn't certain if the animal had a real name, but Eliza's version fit perfectly.

Shithead seemed to take every opportunity to wander off the road to nibble on nearby grass. Or, sometimes, she just wandered off for no explicable reason, and no amount of whipping the reins seemed to motivate the old mare to get back on track. By the time the walls surrounding Tollhouse Farm came into view, Eliza was beginning to wonder if the Hippie had a horse-shaped doppelganger.

Eliza now sat on the wagon, looking down at Tollhouse Farm in the valley below as the mare gorged itself on the tall grass that coated the hills. The sight of the compound was sobering. It forced her to face the reality of what she planned to do, and she spared a furtive glance at the bed of the wagon behind her, where barrels had been stacked in neat rows. They were filled with a simple salve to help the sheep fight the infection. It had been expensive to gather the materials necessary to make several barrels of the substance and Eliza was now nearly broke – once again.

She wouldn't need this much salve to treat the sheep, but she did need the wagon. How else was she going to transport the massive bell to… well, wherever she was supposed to take it? The Hippie – in typical fashion – had failed to explain where she was actually supposed to deliver the damned thing.

Eliza patted the pouch at her side. Lifting the flap gently, she ran her fingers along the jars and vials that had been carefully stored inside. She had spent the rest of her funds and time brewing a number of enhancement potions, focusing primarily on *Dexterity* and *Strength* – with a few potions that increased *Vitality* thrown in for good measure. Of course, she had also prepared a set of miniature jars holding small, virulent mold cultures. It was difficult to believe that she was carrying a biological weapon in her worn pack.

As her gaze returned to the compound, a small sigh escaped Eliza's lips. She could only hope her preparations had been sufficient. Now that she was finally here, it felt like a swarm of butterflies had been released into her stomach. Yet there was no sense second

guessing herself now. She just needed to push forward.

A couple minutes and a lot of cursing later, Eliza arrived at the gates to the compound, and a familiar voice greeted her. “Ho there, stranger!” There was a pause before she heard the voice continue. “Wait, is that you Eliza?”

Eliza raised a hand to shield her eyes from the bright sunlight, finally able to make out a familiar face atop the wall. “H-hi Brian,” she replied tentatively. “I have Clarice’s ointment for the sheep.”

“Great. Just give me a moment, and I’ll open the gate.”

The entrance groaned as the wooden portal shifted open a few seconds later, and Brian’s smiling face appeared. He was dressed in the same worn leathers, and he had a bow lazily slung over his shoulder.

“We were starting to worry that you weren’t coming back,” Brian said with a grin.

“It just took me a while to prepare the salve,” Eliza explained, her gaze dropping to the bed of the wagon.

“Whew, no kidding. You sure we need all of this?” Brian asked as he circled around the wagon to inspect her cargo.

“Since we don’t know what’s causing the scratches, I figured Clarice would want some extra ointment. The alternative was me having to make this trek every few days,” she said, having carefully rehearsed her story.

“Well, that doesn’t sound so bad to me! I could use the company. I have to say it gets a bit lonely standing on a wall for hours at a time,” Brian replied, noting the way Eliza wouldn’t quite meet his gaze. Without warning, he hopped up beside her and took the reins, his fingers brushing hers. “Anyway, let’s get the wagon inside and meet up with Clarice. I expect she’s going to want to put us to work.”

Eliza nodded numbly, trying not to think about how close Brian was sitting or about the fact that she was carrying a ton of mutant mold cultures that she planned to spread around the compound. She just hoped that she could avoid hurting the residents. Although, she expected that they would probably have plenty of time to flee. If not, she could use her mist to knock them out and then use a strength potion to carry them out of harm’s way. That was the plan anyway.

“You seem quiet today,” Brian commented as the wagon lurched slowly through the farm compound. He seemed to have no problems directing the stubborn mare, and she could only assume the horse must have some vendetta against her.

“J-just lost in my thoughts,” Eliza muttered. She ventured a glance at Brian, noticing the way he sat straight on the wagon’s perch and the easy way he guided the unruly horse. “I take it you’re used to dealing with animals… working at a farm I mean.”

Brian chuckled. “I guess. I’m pretty sure I’m just one notch above incompetent. Clarice says I don’t have the knack for being a shepherd. That’s why I get the *luxury* of working the walls.”

“Really? Because you don’t seem to have any trouble with shit-I mean, the mare. I could barely keep her on track on the way here.”

“This old girl?” Brian asked, twitching the reins slightly and eyeing the old mare with a smile. “She seems like a sweetheart. Or maybe she just senses that I needed a break from sentry duty and is taking pity on me!”

“Speaking of which, did I get you in trouble last time?” Eliza asked, suddenly remembering that Brian had been missing when she left the farm.

He grimaced slightly. “I got reamed for leaving my post, but that isn’t exactly unusual. Besides, you didn’t make me leave – that was on me.” Brian sighed in frustration. “Not that I understand what the big deal is. Sure, there are some dangerous creatures living out here, but most don’t dare attack the compound. My job is booooring.”

Eliza couldn’t help but smile at his tone. That sounded pretty close to her feelings about school – an unavoidable and extremely painful nuisance. “And you aren’t going to get in trouble for leaving again today?”

Brian grinned at her. “Actually, I had the foresight to give some notice this time. Clarice has been expecting you for a day or two.”

“Ahh, well that’s good,” Eliza murmured. As their conversation dwindled into an awkward silence, Brian turned his attention back to navigating through the farm to the northeastern edge of the compound.

Eliza shook her head when she found herself glancing furtively at Brian out of the corner of her eye. She needed to focus on her quest, not on… well, whatever this was. She discretely pulled a series of small glass vials from her bag, popping the cork lids with her thumb and flicking the little containers at the bell tower as they passed. It wasn’t important for her aim to be perfect, the vials just needed to land near a clump of grass.

As she spread the mold cultures, Eliza said a silent prayer, hoping that someone – anyone – other than the Hippie was looking out for her.

She had undertaken an extensive set of experiments last night, and she had discovered that the growth rate of the mutant mold was roughly exponential. If she started with a small culture, it could take hours for the mold to reach what she was calling “critical mass” – that point where the mold had grown large enough to easily extend to other sources of organic matter. She hoped that would give her enough time for the townsfolk to flee and for Eliza to figure out how

to steal the bell. Her best option was probably to chug a bunch of strength potions and somehow try to roll the monstrous metal object onto the wagon.

"And here we are," Brian announced a moment later, tugging at the reins to bring the wagon up short. He then hopped down and offered a hand to Eliza.

She just stared at it dumbly for a long moment before accepting his help. It felt weird holding his hand – especially when he kept meeting her gaze and smiling like that. He was probably just being friendly, but she wasn't really used to that. It felt like she spent most of her time – in-game or out – trying to avoid being noticed.

"What is this?" Clarice barked, the severe woman stalking toward the pair from the pens.

Brian gestured at the wagon. "Eliza came back with salve for the sheep."

"It looks like she must have brought some for every farm in the area," Clarice groused, sparing a penetrating look at Eliza.

When he saw Eliza fumbling to respond, Brian stepped in, "She figured you could store anything you didn't use for later. That would probably keep her from having to make multiple trips."

Clarice snorted in irritation, but she seemed to chew on the idea appreciatively. "Fine, fine," she said finally. "There's no sense standing around twiddling our thumbs then." She gestured to Brian. "Unload the barrels and stack them near the lanolin beside the barn."

Then the woman turned on Eliza. "While our young buck here is working on that, you can show me how well this salve works."

"S-sure," Eliza replied, nodding quickly. She grabbed a small vial of the mixture from the back of the wagon.

"See, you get to handle the animals while I get the joy of undergoing manual labor," Brian whispered to her when she came close, his hands already tugging at one of the barrels. "I'm pretty sure she just sees me as another farm animal."

Eliza forced herself to stifle a laugh, but she managed a quick retort. "Well, then you should be a good boy and get this unloaded faster."

Brian just stared at her in mock shock. "My lady, was that… that a joke?"

"Maybe," Eliza murmured, her eyes dropping to the ground and her cheeks suddenly feeling hot. She was spared any further embarrassment when Clarice called for her impatiently.

Eliza spent the next half hour showing Clarice how to apply the simple salve to the scratches on each sheep in the pen. The substance had to be applied by hand – not ingested. This was time-consuming, but there didn't seem to be very many sheep inside the farm, and the

pair finished the applications relatively quickly.

Her work complete, Eliza headed back to the wagon. She had been assuming that the process of applying the salve would take longer – buying her some time for the mold cultures to grow. However, the entire process had taken a little less than an hour, and her stomach was in knots as she tried to think of a compelling reason for her to linger at the farm a bit longer.

"Hey, girl," Clarice called from behind her as she approached the wagon. "A moment?"

Eliza whirled and saw the surly woman beckoning for her to come closer. Brian stood nearby, his chest heaving slightly and his armor looking a little dustier after manhandling the barrels over next to the barn.

"Is there something else?" Eliza asked.

"Actually," Clarice said, glancing at Brian. "Would you mind helping us administer the salve to the rest of the herd? I'm not sure I trust this one to handle it on his own."

Brian looked at Clarice skeptically. "I only saw the process from a distance, but I think I could manage. There's no magic to rubbing some lotion on a sheep's belly."

"This coming from you?" Clarice demanded with a raised eyebrow. "I heard James found you at the archery range with an arrow in your foot."

"T-that was a freak accident," Brian interrupted quickly, glancing at Eliza nervously.

"Uh huh," Clarice grunted before turning back to Eliza. "Anyway, would you mind going out into the fields to help administer the salve? It should only take a few hours, and I can add a few coins on to whatever I already owe you."

Eliza gulped. Leaving the compound hadn't been part of her plan. She needed to stall, but she wasn't sure how long the mold would actually take to grow. If they took too long, things could get out of hand quickly. Someone could get hurt! On the other hand, what choice did she have? She couldn't blow her cover, and this would at least give her an excuse to come back to Clarice for payment.

"S-sure," Eliza said, nodding quickly.

"Then get to it," Clarice said, gesturing at the wagon. "I think you'll only need one barrel if this small group was any indication. I'll let James know that you're working for me today," she added for Brian's benefit. With that, the gruff woman stormed off, presumably to order someone else around.

"Sorry, she can be a little… intense," Brian said to Eliza after Clarice had walked off. He must have misinterpreted the nervous look on her face. "Just let me grab a barrel, and we can be on our way."

Eliza could only stare at his back as Brian walked off for the nearby barn. This hadn't been her plan at all. She was beginning to suspect that the butterflies in her stomach must have laid eggs or mutated or… *something*, because she felt like she was going to be sick. Her gaze shifted back to the bell tower that loomed over the farm.

She could only hope that they could finish administering the salve quickly.

Chapter 30 - Conflicted

The cart rumbled and bounced below them, as Eliza and Brian made their way into the fields outside of Tollhouse Farm. The hills in the area seemed to crest and swell like green waves, and the tall grass waved and rippled in the strong breeze. Meanwhile, a cloudless sky lingered overhead, the occasional flock of birds flapping languidly through the air.

Despite the peaceful setting, Eliza's thoughts were in turmoil. She had set a timer using her system UI, and she couldn't help but glance every few seconds at the numbers ticking down in her peripheral vision. She'd had to estimate the time it would take for the mold to reach critical mass, and, as best she could guess, she only had a few hours left.

Things hadn't gone to plan at all.

"Beautiful day today," Brian said, startling Eliza. She had almost forgotten he was sitting beside her, occasionally tugging on the reins to guide the mare.

"Y-yeah, I guess," Eliza replied.

Brian glanced at her. "I just realized that I don't know very much about you. How did you end up becoming an alchemist?"

"It was an accident, I suppose," she began tentatively. "I met Alma in the market in Falcon's Hook, and she offered to train me." She hesitated for a moment. "I guess it's not a very exciting story when I say it out loud."

Brian shrugged. "I wouldn't say that. It's always fascinating how people came to be where they are. It's never a straight path," he said, a small smile upon his face.

"Oh really?" Eliza asked with raised eyebrows. "Well, how did you end up being a guard at the farm?"

"Hmm, so I guess that proves my point. Mine is a rather long story," Brian said, his eyes distant. "First off, I'm an orphan." He noticed her expression and waved it off. "It's not that uncommon, and I don't dwell on it. I was lucky, actually. I was dropped off on the steps of a church – no idea who my parents were. But the local priest took me in, and he treated me well enough."

He sighed slightly, adjusting their course as he caught sight of the herd in the distance. "That little town was home, but it was a hard place to find work as I grew older. Besides, I was a bit rebellious as a kid – a hell-raiser actually – so I had burnt some bridges. Like top-to-bottom, there's nothing left but ashes level burned… Anyway, I ended

up traveling to Falcon's Hook looking for a job."

"And you found work at the farm?" Eliza asked, watching him more closely now. This was a much more elaborate backstory than she had been expecting from the game's NPCs. Although, she supposed she shouldn't be surprised after her interactions with Alma and Lord Baen. It was sometimes difficult to remember she wasn't talking to a real person.

"That actually took a while," Brian replied with a shrug. "I worked some odd jobs. Tried my hand at carpentry for a while and then some regular farming. It didn't work out. Then my dream for a time was to get picked up on one of the crews for the trade houses…"

As he trailed off, Eliza nudged him. "I guess that didn't work out either?"

"Turns out I get violently seasick!" he said laughing and flipping the reins to bring the mare back on track as she drifted off to eat some grass. "I couldn't even stand on deck in the bay," Brian continued with a self-deprecating smile. "It's pretty hard to do your job when you're projectile vomiting every minute or so."

Eliza couldn't help but chuckle at the image of Brian reeling on deck, momentarily forgetting her quest and the ever-present timer. "Yeah, that might not be your calling."

Brian nodded with a wry grin. "Clearly. I always wanted to travel, though. You know? Have epic adventures, see strange lands, kill a dragon! I don't know. It sounds silly as I say it, but it's still my dream to venture a little further afield." He glanced at the hills with a sardonic expression, clearly appreciating the irony of his last statement.

He glanced at Eliza. "What about you? Does our grand alchemist have any dreams?"

A frown creased Eliza's lips. She found herself struggling to answer that question. What was her dream? She didn't even want to think about her real life. In-game, she enjoyed practicing alchemy and helping in Alma's garden, but she had to admit that a part of her had enjoyed the confrontation with the troll and the players – that sense of power that came with besting an opponent. She had never really felt that before.

"I-I'm not really sure," Eliza eventually replied. "Maybe I'm still working on it?"

"I can understand that," Brian said with a nod. "Probably better than changing course every other month like myself! When you do finally make a decision, I expect you'll be ready to see it through."

Eliza wasn't as confident, but she wanted to shift the subject away from herself. "So how did you end up at the farm? You never really got to that part."

“Oh, you’re right!” Brian said, his eyes sparkling as he glanced at her. “It’s not really that fascinating. I found a notice in town looking for some laborers and shepherds. I wanted to work with the animals, but apparently, I have a knack for combat.” He hesitated slightly. “Or at least I didn’t fall flat on my face during the interview…

“Plus, the farm was willing to train me in melee and ranged combat and give me some experience. Monsters and other creatures do *occasionally* attack, so it’s a pretty good way to level. One little step towards my dream I suppose,” he said with a sad smile.

Eliza started to respond but stopped as a nearby shepherd raised a hand in greeting. They were getting close to the herd now, and Eliza could make out hundreds of sheep shambling through the hills. Shepherds stood in a loose circle around the animals, their eyes scanning the area while monitoring the sheep. She could feel her stomach lurch again as she saw the huge number of creatures – her original goal returning in a rush.

How long was it going to take to apply the salve?

“Hey there, Joe!” Brian called out to the nearby shepherd.

“Surprised they let you off the wall,” the man said, approaching with a grin on his weathered, tan face. A thick beard clung to his chin, and his fingers ran through his thick hair. Instead of carrying a staff, a bow hung over his shoulder, and a sword swung at his waist – evidence that there was indeed some risk of monster attacks out in the hills.

Brian shrugged. “I think James just got tired of yelling at me. He was nearly hoarse by the end there.”

Joe laughed, a deep rumbling sound that reverberated through his chest. Then his eyes lit on Eliza. “And who’s this young lady?”

“My name’s Eliza,” she said quietly, glancing nervously at Brian.

“She’s a novice alchemist. Clarice asked her to bring back some salve to treat the sheep,” Brian explained. “Which is actually why we’re here. Clarice instructed us to bring out a barrel of ointment and help apply it to the herd.”

Joe grimaced as he glanced back at the hundreds of sheep behind him. “Well, I can’t say that I’m excited to get started. That’s going to take a while.”

Eliza could feel the pit in her stomach clench with a vengeance, and her eyes darted to the timer counting down in her peripheral vision. Did they really have enough time to administer the medicine to all of the sheep? Unfortunately, she was committed now. It wasn’t as though she could afford to blow her cover, and she couldn’t think of a good reason to return to the farm on her own.

“It won’t be so bad if we work together,” Brian said with

another shrug. “If you want to call over the other guys, we can set up a little assembly line. Maybe we can move the treated animals further down the hills to keep them separated from the rest of the flock.”

Joe gave a nod, and a moment later, a group of shepherds hung around the wagon. Brian thankfully took charge. He had the foresight to bring containers for the salve and handed them out to each of the men. They then started systematically applying the lotion to each sheep, making sure to cover their stomachs well.

Even working together, the process took quite a while. Eliza couldn’t help but continue to glance at the timer as she worked, her unease growing with each minute that passed. Yet no alarm had sounded from the farm in the distance even as the sun began to drift toward the horizon.

A few hours later, Brian wiped at his brow with his sleeve. “Whew. I think we’re finally done!” he said, sparing a glance at Eliza. At the same time, a notification appeared in the air before her.

Quest Completed: Sheepish

You brought a load of salve to Clarice, although you were actually using your alchemy skills as a way to deceive the poor, gentle woman. She even had the kindness to ask you to help tend her sheep. Yes, kindness! She totally wasn’t pushing off her own work onto you. Now, after spending the afternoon tending to the flock, you have finally completed your task. Of course, whether you will get paid is another question entirely…

Difficulty: D
Success: Return to Tollhouse Farm with a tonic or salve that will fight the infection.
Failure: Ignore this quest?
Reward: You forgot to negotiate for this, yet again.

Eliza was having trouble focusing on either Brian or the notification, the butterflies continuing to flutter in her stomach. Her eyes darted to the timer, noticing that only a few minutes remained. Had her math been wrong? Had she screwed up her experiment somehow? She felt like the residents should have noticed the mold by this point. Which just left her with a single question. Had she missed her chance to destroy the bell tower?

“T-that wasn’t so bad,” Eliza managed to squeak out, realizing

that she had been ignoring Brian's comment. "Are we heading back to the farm now?"

Brian glanced at the sun as it was beginning to crest the hills. "We probably should. They'll need to bring the herd back before nightfall anyway," he said, gesturing at the shepherds as they slowly corralled the sheep and began urging them back toward the farm.

As Eliza and Brian retook their seats on the wagon and began turning the mare's head back toward Tollhouse Farm, Eliza finally heard the sound she had been dreading all afternoon. The deep chime of a massive bell rolled over the hills, echoing slightly but still clearly coming from the direction of the farm.

The whole group froze, many of the shepherds cocking their heads and glancing at each other in confusion. They seemed to be waiting for something. The sound repeated another two times, and Eliza could see many of the men's eyes widen in a mixture of surprise and fear.

"Shit," Brian murmured, his expression suddenly serious.

"What? What's wrong?" Eliza asked.

"That's the alarm. Three chimes means the farm is under attack," he said in a dark tone. "We need to get back quickly."

The shepherds must have had the same idea. They grouped up, talking in hushed tones. A moment later, a few of the men moved back to the flock to continue dealing with the sheep. The others approached the wagon at a brisk jog.

"Hey, Brian," Joe said, his smile now gone. "We need to hitch a ride with you, and we're leaving some men to keep an eye on the herd. We need to get back to the farm quickly."

"Hop on," Brian replied, gesturing at the bed of the wagon.

The men promptly piled onto the vehicle, and they took off for the farm, Brian urging the mare to move as fast as possible. The animal was reluctant, but Brian didn't relent, whipping at the reins every time the horse paused or slowed. Even the irritating animal seemed to understand that something was wrong, and she managed a slow trot. The speed made the vehicle bump and stutter more erratically, setting Eliza's teeth on edge.

Her anxiety wasn't helped by the group of men in the bed of the wagon. They pulled daggers and swords from their sheaths and checked their quivers – clearly preparing for a fight. For a moment, Eliza considered leveling with them about what they were facing. It wasn't like the mold could really fight back. These people had been nothing but nice to her – even if they might be smuggling Lord Baen's stolen cargo.

Yet she quickly shut down that idea as she realized that this would immediately lead to follow-up questions that she wouldn't be

able to answer. She could already envision the anger and betrayal in their eyes when they realized what she had done.

She also didn't relish the idea of dying again – even if the game wasn't real.

So, she kept her mouth firmly shut, her knuckles white as she clutched one of her wands. A few short minutes later, the wagon teetered over the crest of a hill and the farm came back into view. The entire group froze as they witnessed the scene that was playing out in the small valley, the muffled gasps of the shepherds nearly drowned out by the clash of metal and the screams of the farm's residents.

"Oh…oh, my god," Eliza murmured. Never in her wildest dreams could she have imagined the scene that was playing out before her. Her eyes were wide, and her mouth hung open as she witnessed what had happened to the farm – what she had done to these people.

Chapter 31 - Mutated

Eliza gaped as she took in the pure, tumultuous chaos that was now Tollhouse Farm. Even from the hills ringing the compound, she could see men and women running through the makeshift dirt streets – their panicked shouts filling the air. They were all fleeing the center of the farm, and the reason soon became obvious.

A pulsing blue substance now riddled the bell tower, spanning nearly thirty feet into the air. Flower-like blossoms had erupted from the structure and shone a brilliant red and yellow in the waning sunlight. Eliza could only imagine that the warning they had heard earlier had been given before the mold overtook the structure entirely.

The fungus hadn't been sated by the tower. It had already begun to spread to the other structures ringing the bell tower, overtaking the blacksmith and several of the nearby residences. It stretched and crawled across the buildings at a frightening, insidious pace. The fungus was mutating out of control now that it had unfettered access to organic material. Near the furnace, the mold had taken on a ruddy orange color. Thick plumes of spores sporadically erupted from the rest of the mass, the finger-sized clusters drifting on the wind like ash before latching onto nearby residents and structures.

The damage didn't stop there. Eliza could see the spores spreading along the ground as well – the fungus picking up a relentless momentum as it continued to feed. It shifted along the streets, overtook errant carts and barrels, and raced after the fleeing residents – even as it continued to change and morph in a kaleidoscopic rainbow of colors.

A young woman stumbled in her attempt to escape the noxious tide, landing heavily on her knees. Eliza gasped softly as several of the airborne spores landed on her back. The substance immediately ate into her clothing before connecting with naked flesh. The woman screamed, clawing at her own skin – which only served to spread the fungus to her hands. As the rest of the mold caught up to the woman, it ate into her flesh at a remarkable pace, and within only a few seconds it had wholly overtaken her body. Her screams were abruptly cut off as a cocoon of yellow mold fully covered her form.

"What…what is this?" Brian murmured in a horrified voice.

Eliza turned to him, noting the mixture of fear and awe on his face. She opened her mouth to say… something, but she was interrupted by one of the shepherds.

"Look at that!" a man shouted from behind her, gesturing at the

town.

She followed his finger to the same woman that had been consumed only a moment before. The cocoon pulsed and throbbed before breaking open with a fresh puff of spores. What stepped out of the cocoon was no longer human – although it still vaguely resembled the former woman. It was a little more than five feet tall, it's body comprised of rope-like bands of fungus. A mushroom now rested where the woman's face had been only moments before, new spores already accumulating along its surface.

As her chest heaved and panic flooded her mind, Eliza inspected the creature.

Sporeling – Level 50-300 (Fluctuating)
Health – Unknown
Mana – Unknown
Equipment – Unknown
Resistances – Unknown

The creature shambled forward with awkward steps at first before it caught its footing. Then it began a loping run toward the other fleeing residents. The sporeling grabbed hold of another man, tackling him to the ground. He fought against the monster vainly, his hands smacking at its bulbous head to no avail – only serving to spread the mold spores across his skin. The sporeling leaned forward and exhaled a cloud of spores directly into the man's face, causing him to choke and gasp.

The effect was nearly instantaneous. The trapped man's body spasmed in pain, and his limbs jerked erratically. Eliza's guess was that the mold was eating him from the inside out – starting with his lungs and moving on to his spine and central nervous system. Within only a few seconds, another cocoon of mold had begun to form, signaling the creation of yet another sporeling.

"They're converting them into those… those things," Brian choked out.

Eliza could see that he was right. The mold was continuing to spread through the compound, enveloping the townspeople who were trying to flee and converting them into carriers. The fungus itself was bad enough, but, with the highly-mobile sporelings, it would only be a matter of time before the farm was completely overrun.

The shepherds must have come to the same conclusion because their knuckles clenched tightly around their weapons. "We need to save the farm," Joe shouted, his sword raised high. "Attack!" The others echoed his call as they raced toward the compound, their

voices drowned out by the screams of the residents.

Brian moved to jump off the wagon and join the others. Without thinking, Eliza grabbed his arm. “No. Don’t!”

He whirled toward her, his eyes fearful but determined. “What do you mean? They’re dying! We have to do something!”

“I-I know,” Eliza replied earnestly. She didn’t want to tell him that she was responsible for this – she couldn’t. But she also couldn’t bear to see Brian die. She pointed at the farm with a trembling hand. “How do you plan to fight that? This isn’t a normal monster. As soon as the mold touches bare skin, it will eat into your body, and you’ll become one of those… those creatures.”

Brian turned back to the village, and he could see the truth of her words. Cocoons littered the ground, evidence that many of the residents had already been taken. Their bodies had been turned into incubators for the sporelings. “Then what do we do?” Brian asked in a tortured, desperate voice.

That was a good question, and, unfortunately, one that Eliza didn’t know how to answer. This was much worse than she could have possibly imagined. She had hoped to destroy the bell tower… not endanger the entire farm. As her eyes took in the multi-colored tide that spread through the farm, guilt curled and coiled in her stomach. Dozens had died already.

It was even worse than that, wasn’t it? What would happen when the mold reached outside the walls of the farm? The answer was staring right at her, Eliza’s eyes lingering on the thick grass covering the neighboring hills. It would grow at a frightening pace, expanding so rapidly that there would be no way to fight it. As long as it had access to more organic material, the mold would grow until it stretched to Falcon’s Hook and beyond.

“Shit,” Eliza murmured, closing her eyes to blot out the image of the farm. “Shit, shit, shit.” Her quest was now forgotten as she realized she had a much bigger problem. Had she just endangered the entire game world with her stupid experiment? How could she have messed up this badly?

Brian grabbed her shoulder and shook her slightly. “You need to focus, Eliza. You’re right that we can’t fight it normally. But you’re an alchemist! Do you know what this stuff is? Maybe we can kill it somehow.”

Eliza’s eyes darted open, and she tried to concentrate on Brian’s face, even as her heart raced, and frantic thoughts whirled through her mind. In her desperation, she clung to her water mana, channeling the soothing energy through her body and her eyes turning a brilliant sapphire. As the power overtook her, she felt her thoughts gradually begin to calm.

The power that swam through her veins seemed to whisper to her, its message clear. She couldn't change what had already happened – only affect what happened next. There was no sense dwelling on the past.

Was there any way to fight the mold? There were some obvious solutions based on her own research. Fire would probably be effective, but there wasn't an obvious source of flames available. She chewed on her lip in thought. Or maybe some sort of herbicide?

She had some Ferntail in her pack. She used it occasionally to kill weeds in Alma's garden. Maybe she could do something similar here? But it wouldn't be nearly enough to cover the entire compound. Her eyes shifted to Brian. Perhaps she could at least offer him and the shepherds a protective shield if she used *Obscuring Mist*?

Assuming this even works, she thought grimly.

Unfortunately, she didn't exactly have any better options and the clock was ticking.

"I-I think I have an idea. Give me a second," Eliza said, already digging into her pack. She pulled out one of her wands and a free cartridge. Then she uncapped the liquid herbicide, fumbling slightly in her haste and some of the substance spilling onto her shirt. She ignored this and poured the contents into the cartridge – using every remaining drop of the Ferntail. She flipped open her wand, inserted the new vial, and snapped it closed.

"You need to hurry!" Brian pleaded. "The shepherds are almost at the farm."

Her preparations complete, Eliza began casting *Obscuring Mist*, inserting her wand into the familiar ball of moisture once it began to take shape. As she depressed the button in the side of her rod, the herbicide was injected into the orb, turning it a dull pink before the ball expanded into a vast cloud of vapor that billowed out around the pair.

Eliza turned back to Brian, who was now staring at the cloud skeptically. "This should protect you," she said – hoping that she was right about that. "But you have to stay inside the cloud."

"Sure," Brian began slowly, "but how am I supposed to fight those things?"

Eliza's gaze shifted to the town, the thrashing sensation in her stomach amplifying its pounding intensity despite the calming effects of her mana. Brian had a point. Even with the possible protection of her mist, they had no easy way to kill the sporelings or to quarantine the area. They needed to prevent the creatures or the mold itself from breaching the walls, or they would have a much worse problem on their hands. Then her eyes came to rest on the north side of the compound, focusing on the pen and the nearby barn. A familiar stack

of barrels sat next to the dilapidated building.

"Lanolin," Eliza murmured.

"What? What are you talking about?" Brian demanded frantically.

"The lanolin," Eliza explained, pointing at the barrels. "If you can get to them and spread the oil around the walls, we could light it, and the fire should stop the mold from spreading. We can't let it get outside the walls of the compound."

She could see that Brian was mulling over the idea. "We don't have time," Eliza said insistently. "It's the only plan we have, and we need to move now!"

"We?" he asked in a concerned voice.

"I have to be near you to maintain the cloud," Eliza explained, gesturing at the pink vapor.

Brian didn't look comfortable with the idea of Eliza entering the compound, but he also seemed to realize that they had no other choice. With a curt nod, he started down the hill at a jog. Eliza watched his back for a moment, chewing on her lip once again. They were probably going to die, and this was completely her fault. She hadn't thought about anything other than her own needs.

She shook her head. This wasn't the time for self-recrimination. She had fucked up – badly. But maybe she could fix this. Or at a minimum, maybe she could at least keep the remaining survivors alive and prevent the mold from spreading further than the farm.

Eliza sprinted down the hill after Brian, and the pair hurried to try to catch up with the shepherds. As they neared the gate, Eliza could see that the other men were bashing against the gate with their weapons, the barrier apparently locked from the inside. It idly occurred to her that it wasn't a good sign that no one inside the farm had managed to open the gate. The men frantically carved at the wood, chips flying away with each frantic blow. At the same time, an eerie silence had descended over the farm – the screams finally coming to a stop.

Eliza knew that could only mean one thing.

"We need to hurry!" she shouted as she and Brian neared the shepherds. They spared a momentary, confused glance at the pink cloud surrounding the pair, and she quickly explained, "Stay inside the cloud, and it may protect you from the spores. We're going to head to the pens once we get inside. If we can get the lanolin, we can set the barrels along the wall and ignite them – trapping the mold inside."

The men glanced at Brian, and he nodded quickly. "It's the only way! Keep going!" With that, he pulled his sword and began slashing at the thick wooden beams of the gate.

His efforts were soon accompanied by the other shepherds. Joe, apparently preferring the hand axe to a regular sword, was making much more progress, and his blade carved off large chunks of wood with each swing. Within only a few seconds, the line of men had managed to cut a small hole in the gate. Once it was about the size of a child, Eliza gestured for them to crawl through.

Joe took the lead, crouching and squeezing through the opening with some difficulty. The rest of the group followed closely behind, with Eliza taking up the rear. As she stepped through the opening, she froze.

The inside of the compound was completely transformed. Mold now covered nearly every surface in a rainbow of colors. The fungus had continued to mutate in smaller clusters, creating a chaotic mishmash of mutant growths. It hung in vine-like ropes between the buildings, and massive blossoms had sprouted from the roofs of the former buildings. In addition to the sporelings that ambled along the streets, the mold itself was still growing, swiftly spreading toward the walls ringing the farm.

They didn't have long.

Holding her breath, Eliza urged her mist forward. Here was the moment of truth. The pink vapor drifted forward slowly, barely touching the edge of the mold. Where the moisture clung to the fungus, it began to wilt and darken – withering before her eyes. Yet as soon as the moisture receded, the mold grew back with a vengeance.

If it mutates and develops a resistance to the herbicide…

She didn't want to finish that thought.

"We need to move," Eliza said to the men around her. They looked terrified, but they had no choice at this stage. "We're going to have to do this at a run. Just try to keep the sporelings off of us and don't leave the mist."

They all nodded.

"On three," Brian said.

"One.

"Two."

He took a deep breath and the group tensed.

"Three."

As Brian finished speaking, the group darted forward, Eliza trying her best to keep the mist around them. Where the pink vapor touched the mold, it carved a path forward. The fungus was thinner toward the edges of the small town, and they made good progress at first, sprinting between the buildings and dodging the bursts of spores that occasionally erupted from the large rainbow blossoms mounted to the nearby structures.

Then the sporelings began to notice their presence. One of the

mushroom monsters raced directly into the pink mist – letting out a gurgling noise as the vapor touched its skin. The herbicide ate away at its flesh, the creature stumbling and falling to its knees before breaking apart into a pile of desiccated mold.

This didn't deter the remaining creatures. As a group, they sprinted toward Eliza and the shepherds. They crashed against the pink mist over and over again, despite the way the vapor ate away at their shifting bodies like acid. The first dozen died quickly, their flesh shriveling rapidly. However, Eliza noted with growing fear that more and more of the creatures were managing to stumble back to their feet before they died, their bodies almost regenerating faster than the mist could destroy them.

They were already adapting.

Out of breath and dizzy from the chaos, they finally reached the pens. Brian gestured at the men. "Everyone grab a barrel. We'll move clockwise around the perimeter of the farm and ignite the barrels behind us."

The shepherds raced to follow his orders, sparing the occasional glance at the mold creatures that still battered themselves against Eliza's mist. Brian finally noticed that it wasn't killing them as effectively and he whirled to Eliza. "What's happening?"

"They're mutating," Eliza gasped, continuing to channel the spell even as she pulled a mana potion and chugged its contents to replenish her waning mana pool. "I can't keep this up forever!"

Brian's eyes widened at this announcement, and he turned back to the other men. "Hurry!" he screamed. "We need to get moving!"

A moment later, each man had grabbed a barrel of oil. They immediately set one next to the wall adjacent to the pens. "Does anyone have any fire affinity?" Eliza asked the men quickly, wanting to slap herself for failing to think of this simple problem.

They all shook their heads slowly. *Of course, they don't have magic*, Eliza mentally yelled at herself. *They're shepherds! How the hell are we going to ignite the barrels?*

Then Joe spoke up, "We can use the branding wand!"

He raced back to the barn near the pens, Eliza trying to keep the mist near him. He grabbed a short rod and then ran back. As he neared, Eliza could see that held something that resembled her own wand, fire crystals embedded into the hilt. Joe ripped the lid from the barrel along the wall and then depressed the button in the side of the wand. A stream of flame raced forth in the shape of the farm's logo.

As the fire touched the oil, it immediately ignited, and Joe leaped backward to avoid the flames. The fire expanded ferociously, soon lapping at the walls of the farm. The mold creatures recoiled at the blast of heat, but it didn't do anything to deter them from

continuing to attack Eliza's pink-clad shepherds.

Seeing that the branding wand would work, Brian gestured for the rest of the group to get moving. They began running around the perimeter of the farm as best they could with the heavy barrels. Every few dozen feet, they would set down a barrel and ignite it. Meanwhile, the sporelings and the growing flames chased them.

Eliza's legs burned, and her breath came in ragged gasps as they made their way forward. The others weren't in much better shape, several of the shepherds beginning to lag behind as their stamina quickly depleted.

The sporelings were also becoming more aggressive, slamming their bodies into the mist relentlessly while their bulbous heads let out angry wheezes and puffs of spores. One creature entered the mist, stumbling to its knees as the mold making up its body shriveled and shrank. As they ran past the sporeling, Eliza spared a glance over her shoulder and saw the creature' prone body twitch slightly before it began to retake its feet and shamble after the group – the mist unable to destroy the creature completely.

Eliza screamed a warning, and one of the men whirled, his sword in hand. He slashed at the sporeling, his blade slicing easily through the mold creature and carving a furrow in its arm. However, the blow also released a wave of spores that sprayed the poor man's face. He immediately breathed in the fungus, letting out a gurgling scream of pain before toppling over. Then the sporeling was upon him, latching onto his body with its corrupt arms.

Brian turned to help the downed man, but Eliza grabbed his arm. "You can't," she yelled. "He's gone. We need to keep moving." The other men glanced at her with fear-glazed eyes, but they didn't move immediately. "Run! Now, or we're all dead!" she yelled, forgetting her own nervousness in the heat of battle.

As they kept up their headlong dash, Eliza spared a final glance back at the downed shepherd behind them. The mist was slowing the infection that was spreading through his body, but it wasn't enough to stop it entirely – merely prolonging the agony. With a hollow pit in her stomach, Eliza shifted the mist, keeping it with the group and uncovering the infected man. He was immediately overtaken by the mold as her protection left him.

She didn't have time to dwell on his death.

The other sporelings were charging again, and a wave of fire was visible in front of the group, signaling that they had nearly come full circle around the compound. The shepherds fought off the creatures as best they could within the mists as Brian set the final barrel. The men tried to cover their faces and skin, but it was no use. Even the smallest scratch would cause the sporelings to expel a cloud

of mold and Eliza's mist was continuing to lose its efficacy. The creatures seemed to have no sense of self-preservation and would lunge blindly at the shepherds, making it hard to avoid their attacks.

Brian ignited the final barrel, and it exploded in a shower of flame. The heat pushed back at the creatures and created a small opening around the group. Eliza could now see a wall of fire encircling the farm, the flames darting into the sky and incinerating the spores that drifted on the wind.

Meanwhile, an army of sporelings was approaching through the pink mist toward their injured and tired group. They were now taking their time, as though they knew that their prey was trapped. The creatures' gangly, corrupted bodies jerked as they stepped forward slowly and their hissing wheeze mingled with the roar and crackle of the flames behind the group.

The massive bell tower framed the oncoming horde of sporelings in the distance. Its surface had continued to mutate in the time it had taken the group to make their way around the compound. The wooden beams had long since been devoured, and a gigantic glowing blue bulb now rested in its place, the plant stretching nearly thirty feet into the air and blue veins riddling its surface. The skin of the bulb seemed to throb and pulse ominously.

As Eliza stared at the oncoming sporelings and felt the heat of the fires at her back, the thrashing sensation in her stomach finally settled, only to be replaced by a heavy weight. They had succeeded in walling off the mold, but now they were trapped inside the farm without anywhere to run.

Brian looked at Eliza, his eyes glazed over with fear and his chest heaving. "What do we do now?" he asked frantically. Only Joe and two of the shepherds still stood nearby, sweat trickling down their skin and reflecting the glowing inferno behind them as they faced off against the oncoming creatures with their weapons raised.

"I-I don't know," Eliza gasped, watching as the sporelings descended upon the group. "I just… I don't know," she repeated in a whisper.

Chapter 32 - Evolved

Eliza's thoughts raced as she saw the sporelings approaching through the mists. The heat of the flames on her back was almost oppressive, yet it didn't seem to deter the mold monsters as they continued forward, each ponderous step another nail in their coffins. The sporelings didn't seem to be affected by her mist any longer, the vapor only causing a thin layer of mold to peel away from their bodies.

The remaining shepherds and Brian clutched at their weapons, preparing to make a last stand as Eliza stared at the oncoming monsters. In the distance, the enormous sapphire bulb pulsed with a disturbing blue light, the entire structure vibrating slightly and causing the ground to tremble and shake.

No brilliant plan materialized.

No epic music played.

No one was coming to their rescue.

Eliza didn't know what to do, and their backs were quite literally pressed against a wall of fire.

"Stay behind me," Brian said, pushing her toward the rear of the group. He spared a momentary glance at Eliza, and she could see the fear in his eyes. Despite that, he was still trying to protect her – the person who had caused this entire mess and killed all of these people. Guilt swiftly colored the chaotic whirlwind of thoughts spinning through her mind.

The sporelings didn't wait for her self-recrimination. The front line of creatures struck the shepherds. It was a massacre. The men tried to swing their weapons, but they were ineffective against the insidious creatures, each blow simply launching more deadly spores into the air – which either landed on exposed flesh or were inhaled into the shepherds' lungs where they ate away at their organs.

Eliza watched as a creature latched onto Joe's legs, a warning catching in her throat. Pinned, Joe was unable to react, and another sporeling leaped at his chest, curling around his upper torso. The creature then lifted a single arm, the mold spores shifting and tumbling erratically, before plunging the extremity into the shepherd's throat. His eyes bulged, and his limbs flailed helplessly, but it was already too late. The mold immediately began eating at his insides, green veins appearing on his skin before exploding through his flesh and forming another thick cocoon.

Finally, only Brian stood in front of Eliza, swinging his sword

wildly and barely managing to keep the horde of creatures at bay. A handful of spores had already landed on his arms, and Eliza could see his flesh beginning to boil and peel away under the corrosive fungus. Despite the pain that she knew must be wracking his body, Brian kept fighting, refusing to give up his position even as his friends died around him.

Eliza stood frozen watching the young man. He was dying. She could see that clearly even without the system UI. And what was she doing? Standing there watching? Frozen in indecision while these men gave up their lives for her mistake? Doing what she always did? Backing down – wracked by indecision.

Brian stumbled to his knees, losing his balance as a sporeling snatched at his legs. Another creature loomed over him, preparing to deliver a death blow even as dozens of sporelings hung around them in the mists.

Is this how they would die?

Then a small flare of anger bloomed in Eliza's chest. Why did it have to be like this? Why was she being backed into a corner again? This time it was the Hippie and Lord Baen. But didn't she always do this? Allow other people to pressure her? Her parents. Her classmates. Is that who she was? Just a pushover? A punching bag that just blindly accepted others' blows?

In the back of her mind, a voice whispered, *you don't have to accept this*.

She wouldn't. Not again.

All at once, mana flooded her body in a rush. Eliza's hands began moving of their own volition – dancing through an intricate series of gestures. She gave up thinking about what spells she was casting and gave herself over to the strange feeling that permeated her body. Shards of ice appeared in the air all around her, racing forward with terrible force and slamming into the body of the sporeling that stood over Brian.

The creature reeled backward under the barrage, but Eliza didn't relent. Dozens of glowing sapphire circles began to form around her and Brian as she continuously cast *Cold Grasp*. A moment later, massive spikes of ice erupted into the air, creating a formidable barrier between the pair and the horde of sporelings. However, she could already see the creatures beating against the barrier with their gangly limbs and the flames behind her beginning to melt the wall.

Her eyes flitted to Brian where he lay on the ground. Mold spores clung to his skin, his arms and hands little more than mangled stumps. He gurgled futilely, his eyes wide and panicked as he stared desperately at Eliza – pleading for help but unable to speak. She rushed to his side, dropping to her knees.

I have to save him, she mentally screamed at herself.

A part of her already knew that it was too late, but she shoved that doubting voice away, abandoning all reason as she ripped open her pack and grabbed at jars and vials. She applied the few remaining drops of Ferntail directly to Brian's skin, but the herbicide barely blunted the mold. Then she used her healing potions, forcing him to swallow the crimson liquid and drenching his arms. The contents of dozens of enhancement potions of all shapes and sizes soon followed, sloshing against his body in a rainbow of colors. She used anything and everything at her disposal to slow the effect of the mold.

It still wasn't enough.

Brian's chest rose and fell feebly, and the creatures continued to slam against her makeshift, frozen wall. Yet she couldn't think of anything besides saving the young man who had smiled at her. That grin was burned into her mind. She wanted to salvage something – anything – from this mess she had created. She had to. She stared at the cocktail of potions streaming down Brian's skin. She just needed more, but she didn't have any other potions or ingredients.

Then a crazy thought occurred to her.

In her desperation, Eliza began casting *Accelerated Growth*. Dewy drops of liquid mana formed around her fingers, but it wasn't enough – not nearly enough. She poured her entire mana pool into the spell, feeding it every ounce of power she had left. The droplets on her skin thickened and solidified until they formed a solid coat of liquid mana. Then she pressed her hand to Brian's chest.

The effect was incredible. His body practically exploded, flowers and stems of all shapes and sizes blooming directly from his skin. Eliza couldn't even track the number of herbs and plants that were present, and she numbly realized that the plants must represent every ingredient in the potions she had poured on his body, each lingering plant cell responding to the effects of *Accelerated Growth*.

Vines and roots appeared along Brian's arms, arching into the air and spiraling back down toward his body. His flesh and bone melted away under the changes, only to be replaced a moment later with a bark-like substance. His muscles turned into knotty ropes of vegetation. And, through it all, Eliza stayed beside him, her hand pressed to his chest, and her mana coursing through her body – even as she watched Brian's eyes close and his face melt away under the changes.

Then Brian's body gave a final explosion of growth, throwing Eliza away. Her back slammed into the ice wall, causing cracks to radiate outward from the impact and the wind to race from her lungs in a whoosh. She fell to the ground a moment later, struggling to stay conscious as her vision swam and danced and red notifications

appeared in her peripheral vision.

"Brian," she croaked, crawling back to his body as the ice walls around her finally began to crumble – the wheezing gasps of the sporelings filling the air once more. She inched forward until she could see him again.

He was no longer human. That much was clear. Brian's body was now a roiling mass of plant-life, woven together in such an intricate pattern and containing so many different species that Eliza couldn't tell where one plant ended and another began.

"Brian!" she shouted, her heart beating frantically and her water mana still flowing through her veins in a torrent.

Then he opened his eyes. They glowed a brilliant blue. They weren't the eyes of a human person, but they still looked at her with intelligence – with a sort of recognition. She clung to that.

"Brian, it's me. It's Eliza," she gasped at him, tears blooming at the corners of her eyes.

"E-Eliza?" the Brian-creature murmured, its voice coming out like the whisper of rustling of leaves.

"Yes," she replied, not sparing any attention to the crashing sound of ice around them. Flames licked at the last remnants of her ice wall, and the rumbling continued to rock the ground around them. "It's me."

"W-what…?" Brian tried to say, raising his arm to touch her face. He froze, his glowing eyes focusing on the branch-like appendage that was now his limb. "What is this?"

"I… I had to save you," Eliza choked out. "I had to!"

She expected horror, anger… something. But what she received instead was a smile. Brian looked at her and *smiled*, despite the chaos around them and the deformed monstrosity that he had become. Time seemed to still for a moment, and Eliza just stared at him in confusion. The look he gave her was almost grateful.

Then time sped back up as the wall finally crumbled, and the sporelings raced toward them, their limbs flailing wildly and a thick cloud of spores filling the air. Brian's gaze turned toward them, and angry azure flames curled away from the orbs of energy that now made up his eyes.

"No."

In a flash of movement, the spiraling branches that made up his arms erupted – growing at a tremendous rate and racing outward in a circle. The spindly appendages promptly ripped the sporelings apart. The tendrils tore at the creatures' bodies, ripping and shredding them in a frenzy until a thick cloud of spores filled the air. However, Brian protected Eliza from the onslaught of fungus. His chest exploded, forming a shell of vegetation that blocked the malignant mold and

seemed to absorb it into his very flesh.

"What is this?" Eliza whispered, staring at the cage of branches surrounding them, flowers blooming along their length.

"I-I don't know," Brian replied in a confused, distracted voice. "I think I can grow my limbs… It feels…"

He trailed off, staring into space as he focused on something that Eliza couldn't see. Meanwhile, the ground continued to tremble before splitting open, fissures forming in the dirt. Eliza focused on the epicenter of the tremors and found herself staring at the massive, glowing blue bulb in the center of the farm.

The plant trembled and jerked, clearly causing the earthquakes that were rocking the compound. Cracks had formed around the enormous bulb and radiated outward through the compound. Eliza didn't understand what was happening. Acting quickly, she used her *Inspection* skill.

> **Queen Cluster – Level 500 (Boss)**
> This creature has mutated to the point that it has evolved semi-sentience. The bulb appears to be preparing to release a massive cloud of spores into the air. So, umm, yeah. That seems bad! Maybe you should start running. Just an idea…
> Health – Unknown
> Mana – Unknown
> Equipment – Unknown
> Resistances – Unknown

As Eliza skimmed the prompt, she breathed in sharply. She stared at the bulb with newfound fear, the structure towering nearly three stories into the air. It was sentient now? What did that even mean? And why was it trying to release spores?

Her eyes darted between the bulb and the wall of flames that encircled the compound in confusion. Maybe she was approaching this wrong. If she were a mutant, sentient mold trapped inside a burning compound, what would she try to do? Dread filled her stomach as the obvious answer practically slapped her in the face.

She would try to escape.

"What is it?" Brian asked, noticing her fearful expression.

"I-it's that bulb," Eliza gasped, pointing at the towering plant. "It's about to release more spores. If it shoots them over the walls…"

She trailed off, but Brian seemed to pick up on the implication of what she was trying to say. His sapphire eyes looked panicked for a brief moment before finally settling into a look of determination. He rose abruptly, the shield of branches withdrawing back into his body.

As the barrier disappeared, Eliza could see that the sporelings were all dead, desiccated piles of mold lying around them in a circle.

"Then we have to stop it," Brian said, offering her a hand up. As he raised the limb, the branches shifted and twined together, forming something that resembled a human hand.

Eliza stared at the extremity. How could he have such courage after what they had been through? The death of the shepherds, the destruction of the farm, and the changes that had warped and corrupted even his own body. How could he still look at her with that little grin that curled the corners of the vines that now made up his mouth?

And how could she back down in the face of that sort of courage?

She accepted his grip, and he lifted her to her feet. At the same time, she forcefully summoned her water mana once more. If Brian had placed his life and his faith in her – then she would try to live up to it.

"What do we do?" Brian asked calmly, waiting for her instructions.

Eliza glanced quickly around them. The pen and barn still lingered nearby although the surface of the structure was now coated in a thick layer of mold. Several barrels of lanolin still rested beside the barn. Fire would probably work – it had certainly done the trick so far. They just needed to deliver it somehow. Her gaze darted between the oil and the bulb in the center of the farm as she tried to think of a plan.

Brian was watching her closely, and he followed her gaze to the barrels of oil. "I can carry the barrels."

Eliza whirled toward him. "No. That's suicide. There won't be time to…"

He just chuckled, the sound drifting from his lips like the rustle of branches. Brian lifted his arms, tracing the twining vines and flowers with one limb. "Don't you see this body? I'm already dead! You gave me a second chance, and I owe you for this. Besides, as you said before, we can't let the mold spread."

"But…" Eliza began, the guilt in her stomach thrashing like a living thing. He didn't know that she had caused this; that she was responsible for his brush with death.

"Don't worry," Brian murmured, moving closer and his vine-like fingers brushing her lips. "It doesn't matter. We all grow and die, only to be reborn anew. I can see that now. I can see so much that I missed before." His glowing blue eyes peered into hers, and it felt like for just a moment he could glimpse her soul.

"Promise me something," Brian whispered.

“Anything,” Eliza choked out, feeling new tears springing up in the corners of her eyes.

“Just promise me that you will find your dream someday. And when you do, don’t let anyone or anything stop you from grabbing it with both hands. Don’t ever let it go,” he said, the branches of his face contorting into another sad smile. “Find your own adventure.”

Eliza tried to respond, but he didn’t give her a chance. Without warning, Brian tossed her to the side and slammed down on his arm with his other limb, severing it cleanly. The decapitated branch spun in the air before crashing into the ground. Stiff limbs promptly erupted from the soil, forming a massive protective dome over Eliza and trapping her inside.

“No! Brian, don’t!” she screamed.

He either didn’t hear her, or he simply didn’t acknowledge her pleas. Instead, Brian raced toward the barn, his legs lengthening and stretching with each step. In only moments, he was beside the mold-covered structure. Spindly branches erupted from his back, snatching at the remaining barrels and lifting them into the air. They raced back to his body before embedding themselves in the writhing vegetation that made up his back. In one hand, she could see that he held the familiar branding wand.

Brian spared one last glance at Eliza, his glowing eyes flaring powerfully. Then he turned to the Queen Cluster in the center of the compound. The mold seemed to anticipate what Brian was about to do and it lurched abruptly. The fractures running along the ground widened, shifting the blanket of mold that covered the ground and causing the entire compound to buck and heave. Meanwhile, dozens of sporelings began to take shape, pulling themselves together from the fungus that still lingered on the nearby buildings.

None of this deterred Brian. He raced toward the creatures, his eyes blazing with sapphire energy. Eliza tried to think of something – anything – to help him, but she came up short. She was completely out of mana, and her pack was outside the cage of branches. She was helpless and could only watch as Brian hurtled toward the Queen Cluster and its army of sporelings.

He slammed into the mold creatures without slowing down. The branches that were his arms whipped through the air with blazing speed, cutting many of the sporelings in half and their bodies crumbling lifelessly to the ground. Yet the mold was legion. For every sporeling Brian destroyed, another three filled its place, creating a veritable wall of the creatures in front of the Queen Cluster.

The sporelings raced toward Brian as one, their gangly limbs flailing and the insidious hiss of their breath filling the air in a cacophony of noise. They launched themselves at him without any

sense of self-preservation, clawing at his body in a frenzy. He managed to destroy them at a fantastic rate, his arms contorting and whipping at the creatures and his limbs racing away from his torso to destroy any sporelings that managed to circle behind him.

Yet he couldn't kill them all. Several made it past his defenses, clinging to his skin and covering his body in their insidious spores. Brian might have been resistant to the fungus, but he wasn't immune. The mold ate into the branches and vines that made up his body and tore at his bark-like skin. He let out a tortured wail as the fungus ate entirely through one of his arms, the branches crashing to the ground.

Eliza could only look on from inside her branch-prison. She wanted to help him. She wanted to rush to his aid. However, she was powerless. In her desperation, her thoughts turned to the Hippie – his irritating face appearing in her mind's eye. If he really was a god, then maybe he could hear her prayers.

"Please," she whispered. "Please give me the strength to help him." She pleaded and begged under her breath. "You have to help."

Brian stumbled, dropping to his knees under the endless barrage of sporelings.

"Please!" Eliza cried out more urgently. "I'll do anything!"

"Anything at all…"

And then Hippie answered her call.

A massive torrent of water mana flooded Eliza's body, rushing through her veins in a tidal wave that she could barely control. The energy was so intense that it was almost painful, the sensation making it difficult to think clearly. A sapphire aura of power enveloped her body, expanding outward in a mist so thick that it began to blot out the scene in the courtyard. And in the center of that maelstrom of power – in the eye of that tornado of energy – she sensed an eerie all-encompassing calm. The feeling was fleeting, like the glimpse of a hummingbird's wings in the middle of a hurricane.

Then it was gone – replaced with a single notification.

System Notice: Divine Touch

You have prayed to your truly courageous and compassionate god, and he has answered your call – even though, technically, it was past regular business hours. He will be charging you for overtime.

You have been touched by a god – in a totally PG-13 sort of way, of course! Water mana now infuses your very being. For a time, you will be able to cast without mana restrictions. This effect will last sixty seconds.

"Yeah, you totally owe me." – the Hippie

Eliza swept away the notification without even reviewing the text. She hadn't forgotten her goal. Her glowing blue eyes rested on Brian's failing form – nearly buried under the army of sporelings. She raised a hand, and a ball of water mana began to collect in her palm. She let it grow, feeding it every drop of the mana that filled her body; pouring her heart and soul and desperation into the spell.

Then she cast *Accelerated Growth* one final time.

This was no droplet or trickle. A stream of mana – so dense that it was nearly blinding – rocketed away from Eliza's palm, the explosion of energy slamming her back into Brian's protective shield. As the beam struck Brian, his body contorted. His eyes flashed a brilliant sapphire once again, and then his body erupted outward – branches lancing in every direction and destroying the sporelings around him.

Brian's body grew rapidly in size until he was nearly ten feet tall, his arms and legs thickening and expanding at an unbelievable rate and flowers blooming along his skin. Using his new form, he waded through the sporelings, leaving a path of destruction in his wake as he continued his mad dash toward the Queen Cluster.

The mold seemed to anticipate that he was getting close. Clusters of spores formed in the air, creating a barrier between the bulb and Brian. The wall thickened and grew at an alarming rate. The mold also mutated once again, forming thick spikes along the surface of the wall facing Brian.

He didn't slow.

Instead, as he approached the barrier, Brian's legs grew and reformed, shooting him up into the air. As he reached the top of the wall, he severed his own legs with a single well-placed blow of his arm – the extremities already reforming before he hit the ground on the other side of the wall.

And then Brian was at the base of the Queen Cluster. He quickly grabbed the plant, his hands and feet carving holes in its surface as he scaled the monstrous bulb. The mold of this plant must have been more acidic than its underlings because it ate into Brian's arms faster than he could regenerate – even with Eliza's assistance.

This didn't deter Brian. He kept going even as spores ate into his torso and his limbs melted away, reforming over and over again. A few excruciating seconds later, he reached the apex of the bulb. With a final roar, Brian ripped into the plant, carving a massive hole and

entering the plant itself.

Seconds ticked by and Eliza's heart thudded in her chest.

Suddenly, a massive explosion erupted from inside the Queen Cluster, mold spraying in every direction and the sides of the monstrous bulb peeling away before crashing to the ground. The fires raged, spearing into the air and the heat and flames cascading outward in a tidal wave of destruction that incinerated any sporelings standing near the bulb.

The remaining sporelings lingering around the farm promptly collapsed, their bodies crumbling into piles of fungus. Meanwhile, spore plumes rocketed through the compound, released by the smaller bulbs lingering on the tops of each structure. Yet the mold didn't make it far. The flames encircling the compound made short work of the insidious substance, and the fires raging through the farm wiped it clean.

In the middle of it all stood Eliza, brilliant sapphire tears streaming down her cheeks as she stared at the roaring flames and the devastation. Her fingers numbly encircled a branch of her cage, and she closed her eyes to blot out the scene around her. She had caused this. She had caused all of this. And Brian had died for her mistake.

Chapter 33 - Victorious

Eliza walked through the ruined remains of Tollhouse Farm. The fire had wiped the compound clean of the mold. All that was left of it were piles of the insidious vegetation that still smoldered on the ground. The buildings were nothing more than rubble now. They had been thoroughly destroyed by both the mold and the fire, creating a large circle of burnt earth and ash where the farm had once stood. As far as she could tell, none of the mold had survived.

Eliza had been saved by her *Obscuring Mist*, the vapor barely managing to push back at the flames that had ravaged the farm – not that she saw this as a blessing.

She stepped past a burnt corpse, shriveled mold still clinging to its bones – the only evidence that this farm had once been populated by dozens of farmers and staff. Eliza's stomach boiled at the sight of the blackened skeleton.

Turning away from the corpse, she continued her solemn march toward the center of the farm. In only moments, she identified a large object resting on the ground. It was nearly six feet tall and five feet across, black soot and desiccated fragments of mold covering every inch of its surface. Eliza stepped up to the object, running her hand across the top.

Dust and debris toppled away, revealing a dull metal underneath. Eliza grimaced as she confirmed that she was staring at the farm's bell. With a few swift gestures, she summoned her *Obscuring Mist* once more – using the water vapor to clean the surface of the bell. Soon, black soot ran in small rivulets down the metallic surface.

Only a few moments later, the entire bell was revealed. Apparently, neither the mold nor the fire had been enough to warp or damage the metal. The bell was now the last remnant of Tollhouse Farm.

Eliza leaned back against the metallic surface, closing her eyes. She immediately regretted her decision. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw Brian's face – intricately twining branches framing his glowing blue eyes.

"I killed them all," she whispered in a tortured voice.

Despite Lord Baen's claims, she suspected that many of these people had been innocent of any wrongdoing. Had they really all known about the smuggling operation? Had Brian? Had those shepherds that gave up their lives to stop the mold? Did she even really have any proof that they had been smuggling anything? What

evidence there might have been had been lost to both the fungus and the fire.

Some small voice whispered in the back of her mind, reminding her that this wasn't real – it was just a game. But she mentally recoiled from that line of reasoning. That had seemed pretty damn real. This wasn't the same as what she had done to the players. These people didn't respawn. Their deaths in this world were permanent – just like in real life.

Eliza could feel tears beginning to blossom once more at the corners of her eyes.

"Why the long face?" the Hippie suddenly asked, appearing beside her.

Eliza winced at the sound of his voice, but she refused to open her eyes. A moment later, she felt Fluffy's wet snout push gently against her hand, but she couldn't muster the energy to pet the sheep.

"Are we playing the silent game now?" the Hippie inquired, his voice sounding much closer. "Because I am the grandmaster poobah of the silent game! Just ask Fluffy. He *never* beats me. Never."

"What do you want?" Eliza finally snapped, opening her eyes and staring at the irritating god that lingered only a few feet away. As usual, a broad smile was painted on his clownish face.

"That's a good question. World peace? A cure for cancer?" the Hippie replied, cocking his head. "Hmm, if you give me some time, I'll compile a list. Fair warning, though, it's going to be a long list."

Eliza just stared at the young man, waiting for him to get serious – not that she had high hopes. At this stage, she was just mentally done with him.

"You really are a stick in the mud," the Hippie finally said with a raised eyebrow. He eyed her critically. "And after I helped you… which was totally cheating, by the way."

"I was only here in the first place because *you* sent me here," Eliza said, a dull anger beginning to boil in her veins. "So, you'll have to excuse me if I don't exactly bow down in gratitude."

"Hmm, well my help did allow you to destroy all of the mold," he commented dryly, glancing around the compound as he ran a finger across the surface of the bell, traces of soot clinging to his finger. "I have to say, Fluffy was getting a bit worried there at the end." This earned the god a sideways glance from the sheep, who still hovered protectively beside Eliza.

"I wouldn't have had to create that fungus if you hadn't sent me on this stupid quest," she said, marching toward the Hippie and stabbing a finger at him. "If it weren't for your asinine quest to retrieve a freaking bell, I could have found another way to deal with Lord Baen's task. These… these people didn't all have to die."

The Hippie eyed her appraisingly, his expression suddenly sobering. “Ahh, is that why you seem so upset? The deaths of some farmers?”

“Yes,” Eliza shouted. “I created a mutant fungus that could have wiped out this entire zone – if not the whole continent – and I ended up massacring an entire compound of people. How could that not fucking upset me?!” she demanded, her voice wavering and cracking as she yelled at the Hippie.

The god simply stared at her for a moment before replying. “Like everything else, this was a lesson,” he said quietly, holding her gaze. “Everything dies. Everything. You’re a budding doctor in your world, so I’m sure you understand the concept of entropy. This is a natural cycle – birth and death. There is no defeating it. We can only accept it.”

“Of course, people die,” Eliza snapped, choking back her tears. She didn’t want the god to see her cry. “But I’m the one who killed them.”

“By accident,” the Hippie amended, still watching her with that same eerily sincere expression. “You also had your reasons for pursuing my quest – and Lord Baen’s. And I hear that hindsight is 20/40… wait, I mean 20/20. Or at least I think I do…”

The god shrugged. “In any event, did you know this would happen? Could you have guessed? Would you give up on your goals simply because there is the risk of failure – even if it might be catastrophic? Perhaps just sit down in the middle of your garden and die of starvation for fear that you might inadvertently step on a bug on the way to the nearest inn?”

“I… I,” Eliza began, struggling to come up with answers to his questions.

She wanted to continue ranting at the god and blame him for the deaths of the farmers. However, a part of her knew that he was right – despite how much she might hate to admit it and how much her mind rebelled at the thought that the Hippie could be right about anything. She hadn’t known this would happen. This was just a mistake – a huge mistake. But still a mistake.

“I don’t know,” Eliza finally said.

“Well, I expect that’s the best we can hope for,” the Hippie said, clapping his hands together and causing Eliza to jump in surprise. “But, in any event, you’re wrong.”

Eliza stared at the Hippie, her eyes widening slightly. “Wrong about what?” she asked in a tentative voice.

“You didn’t actually kill *everyone*,” the god continued, pacing the area around the bell and kicking at the ash that covered the ground. “That’s just so dramatic! It’s like, totally unbecoming of you,”

he continued in mock valley-girl accent.

"What… what do you mean?" Eliza asked, ignoring his teasing and looking around in confusion. She had walked through the entire area. She hadn't seen any survivors – even the shepherds and sheep that they had left in the hills in their haste. Eliza could only assume that they must have fled when they saw the fires.

"Hmm, did you check inside the bell?" the Hippie asked, looking at her with an inquiring expression.

Eliza's brow furrowed in confusion. Was the god messing with her? He wasn't above pulling pranks – even at a time like this. However, she still stepped around the bell so that she could see inside. At first, she only saw dark soot and more fragments of mold.

"There isn't anything…" she began.

"Look closer," the Hippie interrupted quietly. "You have to look a bit deeper than the surface. You really shouldn't judge a book by its cover, after all."

Eliza hesitantly reached a hand forward, scraping away at the ash. A few seconds later, she uncovered a small patch of dirt, and she saw a flash of green. She homed in on the foreign object, gently pushing away the loose debris. A moment later, a small sprout came into view – its emerald leaves standing out in stark contrast to the dreary gray ash and soil.

"What is this…?" Eliza whispered. Instinctively, she inspected the sapling.

Strange Sapling – Level Unknown
This sapling appears innocuous at first blush – a simple tendril of life amid the destruction you have caused. Yet a closer inspection reveals that this plant is more than it initially appears. Mana courses through its veins and its leaves feel warm to the touch. If you hold your breath, you can even detect a faint thrumming – the sensation similar to a human heartbeat.
Health – Unknown
Mana – Unknown
Equipment – Unknown
Resistances – Unknown

She stared at the prompt in shock for a long moment. The game registered the sapling as a creature – not as a plant or item. The text also seemed to indicate that this was more than merely some stray weed. As these thoughts raced through her mind, Eliza finally realized what she was cradling in her hands.

"Is t-this Brian?" she asked in a tortured voice, her eyes insistent as she stared at the Hippie. "Don't mess with me."

"It's what is left of him," the Hippie replied, leaning down beside her to inspect the sapling. "Like I said, life is a cycle – death and rebirth. An endless merry-go-round without end. Except that it doesn't come with charming music or cotton candy. Hmm, now that I say it out loud, maybe it's just a really super depressing ride."

"What does this mean, though?" Eliza demanded, whirling to face the infuriating god and ignoring his idiotic jabbering. A faint seed of hope had blossomed in her heart, but she was afraid to water it. "Is he alive? Can I bring him back?"

"I suppose that's technically possible," the Hippie replied, tapping his lips thoughtfully. "Although you don't have the sufficient skills or affinity to do it yet."

"Could Alma…?" Eliza began before drifting into silence as she saw the god shake his head, a grin starting to curl his lips.

Eliza's gaze bounced back and forth between the sapling and the god as a sudden realization settled over her. She knew what the Hippie was doing. He was using her. Again. Manipulating her into continuing to put up with his nonsense with only the faint hope that she might be able to bring Brian back. She felt anger flare in her veins once more, but she tamped down on the emotion. Rage wouldn't help her here. She couldn't change what had happened, only decide how to move forward.

The only question was whether she would keep going or stop here.

The conversation with her parents flashed through Eliza's mind. The harsh comments of her peers. Lord Baen's blackmail. She always let others push her around, forcing her to do things she hated. Would she let the Hippie do the same thing?

However, this was different. She *wanted* to bring Brian back – she owed him that. Was she really being forced into this? Or was the Hippie offering her an opportunity to correct her mistake – if only partly?

"Fine," Eliza finally muttered.

She pulled a vial from her bag and gently scraped the sapling free from the bell before depositing it into its new home. As the small plant settled inside the vial, Eliza could see that small blue veins dotted its leaves, pulsing slightly with water mana.

I'm going to find a way to bring you back, she promised herself, staring at the tiny sapling and her finger running gently down the edge of the glass vial.

"Anyhoo…," the Hippie began in an animated voice, jumping back to his feet. "I believe we also still need to settle the matter of your quest! About that bell…" he trailed off, staring at the massive metallic object.

Eliza stared along with him. Her wagon was still likely sitting on the hill outside of the farm – assuming the mare hadn't run off in all of the commotion. However, she had used her entire stash of enhancement potions on Brian, so she had no way to lift bell into the bed of the wagon and return it to Alma's compound.

Fantastic. After everything, I'll probably still fail this stupid quest.

"Geez, why do you look so morose again?" the Hippie demanded. "You have the bell right here. So now we get to accessorize!"

As he finished speaking, the god snapped his fingers. At first, nothing happened. Only a moment later, however, bands of water mana began to materialize around the bell, wrapping around its surface and squeezing. Eliza's eyes widened in surprise as she saw the bell begin to shrink, growing ever smaller until it could fit into the palm of her hand.

Then the Hippie dipped down, retrieved the miniature bell, and affixed it to the collar around Fluffy's neck. The sheep did a little dance as he tried to look at his new accessory, but it was in such an awkward position that he couldn't quite manage to get a clear look at it. As he shook his head, the bell made a gentle chime. Fluffy froze, mesmerized, before proceeding to shake his head back and forth – causing the bell to ring continuously. He seemed enamored with the sound, letting out a little bleat. As he did so, a notification appeared in front of Eliza.

Quest Completed: Ringing a Bell

You technically accomplished the Hippie's quest – even though you did completely destroy the farm and almost created a mutant mold that would very likely have destroyed most of the continent. So, good job?

Difficulty: A
Success: Acquire the bell at the "farm" for Fluffy's collar.
Failure: Let down your cutest and most courageous companion.
Reward: Putting a smile on Fluffy's face!

Eliza ignored the prompt that had appeared in front of her, still staring at the bell on the sheep's collar. Then she whirled on the Hippie. "Are you kidding me right now? You could shrink the bell this entire time? Why did we go through any of this?!"

The young man's grin widened slightly as he watched Eliza screaming at him, his irritating smile only serving to make her even angrier. After all of his mysterious godly bullshit and that philosophical monologue, he had just been messing with her after all!

"That's it!" she yelled, stuffing the sapling vial in her pack and started off toward the spot where she left her wagon – a string of expletives following her as she stormed off.

The Hippie watched her stalk away for a long moment before turning to Fluffy where he glared in disapproval at the god. "Okay, fine. You were right," the god admitted sullenly. "She was a *little* upset…"

Chapter 34 - Unyielding

Eliza stood outside of Lord Baen's office. She was stalling, and she knew it. After storming away from the Hippie, she had logged out for the evening. She just hadn't been able to handle… well, everything. Not that she was in much better shape now. She still felt a worm of guilt wriggling in her stomach every time she thought about the farm.

Her eyes rested on the door to the merchant's office. She wasn't certain what to expect from this encounter, but, after dealing with the Hippie for so long, she suspected that this conversation wouldn't be simple. Nothing ever was.

With a sigh, she decided to pull up her character sheet – which would put off the inevitable conversation with Lord Baen for a little bit longer.

x18 Level Up!
You have (150) undistributed stat points.

x2 Skill Rank Up: Cold Grasp
Skill Level: Intermediate Level 4
Effect 1: Increases radius by 14%
Effect 2: Increases damage by 4%

x4 Skill Rank Up: Herbalism
Skill Level: Intermediate Level 6
Effect 1: Allows the player to harvest more difficult or dangerous plants. 8% chance for double ingredients.
Effect 2: Low-to-mid level ingredients appear on the map and are highlighted.

x1 Skill Rank Up: Alchemy
Skill Level: Intermediate Level 5
Effect 1: Increases success chance of crafting potions and potion potency by 15%.
Effect 2: Reduces ingredient consumption by 4.5%.

x5 Skill Rank Up: Accelerated Growth
Skill Level: Beginner Level 6
Effect: Accelerated plant growth. The growth rate increases with your skill level.
Cost: 47.5 mana/second.

x5 Skill Rank Up: Obscuring Mist
Skill Level: Intermediate Level 1
Effect 1: Increased range and fog density by 10%.
Effect 2: Increased mist control.

Apparently, the game had given her credit for every farmer and guard killed by the mold – at least that was the only way she could explain her dramatic level and skill increases. That was just a final twist of the knife for what she had done, but she supposed that there was no way to rewind the clock at this point.

She also had a ton of stat points to distribute, but she wasn't quite certain yet how to allocate them. Eliza had noticed that statistics like *Strength* and *Endurance* helped quite a bit with most practical activities in AO, but she could certainly use more mana and higher mana regeneration. A little more mana would have helped quite a bit in that last encounter.

With a flick of her wrist, she brought up her character status.

Character Status			
Name:	Eliza	**Gender:**	Female
Level:	91	**Class:**	Water Mage
Race:	Human	**Alignment:**	True-Neutral
Fame:	0	**Infamy:**	6600
Health:	950	**H-Regen:**	2.30/Sec
Mana:	1900	**M-Regen:**	19.00/Sec
Stamina	950	**S-Regen:**	5.00/Sec
Str:	40	**Dex:**	40
Vit:	50	**End:**	50
Int:	105	**Will:**	105

Affinities			
Dark:	13%	**Light:**	7%
Fire:	5%	**Water:**	32%
Air:	3%	**Earth:**	12%

It was hard to believe that she had only started playing a few short weeks ago. From what she could tell from reading the forums online, she was quite advanced compared to most players. Although, she doubted that many people laid poisonous traps to kill other players or created mutant molds that could take out a town.

Which brought her attention back to the office door standing in front of her. She was *still* stalling, but there was no point in putting off this conversation any longer. She may as well rip off the band-aid so she could get back to Alma's garden.

With a final sigh, Eliza knocked tentatively on the door and entered when she heard Lord Baen call out. She found the older merchant sitting behind his deck, his eyes skimming a weathered piece of parchment. He looked up at Eliza as she entered, and she noticed him do a double take – perhaps not expecting her. She detected a strange emotion flit across his face for the briefest of moments. It almost looked like… fear.

But that couldn't be right.

"Ahh, Eliza," Lord Baen said, regaining his composure and mustering his face into a smile. "It's a pleasure as always. Why don't you take a seat?" He gestured at the chair across from his desk.

Eliza sat down quickly, not certain how to begin their conversation.

The merchant saved her from making small talk. He coughed into his sleeve and glanced at her furtively. "So, I expect you are here to talk about Tollhouse Farm."

"Yes," Eliza said, nodding curtly.

"My spies reported back on the status of the farm," Lord Baen began in a cautious voice, setting down his parchment and pulling off his glasses as he inspected her closely. "What... what happened?"

Eliza bit her lip as she considered what she wanted to tell the lord. "Things got out of hand," she said quietly. "I created a mold that could eat through the wooden buildings, expecting that this would destroy the compound but the residents would live." She hesitated slightly before continuing, her eyes fixed firmly on her hands in her lap, where they twined together in a nervous pattern. "The mold

turned out to be more aggressive than I expected."

Lord Baen leaned forward, his eyes focused on Eliza. "A mold you say? What about the fire?"

She nodded quickly. "I was forced to destroy the fungus to keep it from spreading further. I…" she began but stopped herself. There was really no need to explain anything further – like how she had barely saved the entire zone from being overrun by a mutant mold. Or the fact that they wouldn't be having this conversation if she hadn't burned the farm to the ground.

"Interesting, interesting," Lord Baen murmured. "I could think of several extremely useful applications for this mold if you would be interested in entertaining another small task. Think of the applications with a ship at sea…"

"No," Eliza interjected harshly, raising her eyes to glare at the older man before she could stop herself. She would not be responsible for creating a biological weapon in-game – at least, not again. As she saw the lord's shocked reaction, she tried to pull back a bit, her eyes dropping to the table. "That was the only sample I had, and I'm sure I wouldn't be able to recreate it."

"Ahh, well that's that then," the merchant said slowly, but she could see out of the corner of her eye that his expression was skeptical. Eliza also couldn't help but notice that his hand had drifted below the table when she snapped at him. Was he grabbing at a weapon? Was he really that afraid of her now?

"In any event, you accomplished my task," Lord Baen said, both his hands resurfacing above the table. "The smuggling operation has definitely been stopped, and I don't see Lord Cairn risking something like that again soon. Not after he sees the state of the farm…" the merchant trailed off, suddenly looking nervous again.

"You have my thanks," he finally said. As Lord Baen finished speaking, another notification crashed down in front of Eliza.

Quest Completed: Merchant's Quandary

You not only stopped Lord Cairn's possible smuggling operation, you completely leveled Tollhouse Farm – sending a clear message to Lord Baen's enemies. That wasn't your objective, but when life gives you lemons… Actually, you would probably turn them into some kind of giant fruit monster that eats babies. Nevermind. Please stay away from lemons!

Difficulty: A
Success: Put a stop to the flow of contraband goods.

Failure: Ignore Lord Baen's thinly-veiled threat.
Reward: Avoid having Lord Baen reveal that you have been killing the local townspeople and players for fun. Yay?

Her eyes skimmed the prompt quickly. She detected the Hippie's influence in these notifications. Yet her gaze lingered on the reward – or lack thereof. Had she really gone through all of this for nothing? She had spent most of her remaining funds on the materials to craft the salve for the sheep and the enhancement potions, and she would need to reimburse Alma for the materials she had used when experimenting with the mold as well as the mare and the wagon. In short, she was broke again.

"About my reward," Eliza began.

Lord Baen's eyes widened almost imperceptibly, and his mouth pinched into a line. "I thought we agreed that my *discretion* was a reward in itself."

A flash of anger overrode Eliza's naturally tentative nature. Was he really going to shake her down even after everything she had gone through? Two could play at that game. She hadn't missed the way the merchant shifted nervously in his seat or how he hesitated to describe the destruction of the farm.

She knew what Alma would do in this situation.

Eliza met the older man's gaze evenly, her eyes flashing sapphire as she inadvertently channeled her mana. "While I appreciate you keeping your *opinions* to yourself, I think some other form of payment would be appropriate. For example, as you suggested, we wouldn't want anything untoward to happen to your remaining fleet."

Lord Baen choked slightly and glanced at her angrily. Eliza continued before he could reply, "Besides, I can't help but wonder what the travelers and townsfolk would think if you really were to claim that I was this *Ice Witch*. A young water mage and a fledgling alchemist? This seems far beyond my modest abilities."

A long silence followed this statement, Lord Baen refusing to meet her gaze.

Then the merchant grimaced, clearly chewing on her words. However, he made no move to contradict her, which she took as a good sign. Suddenly, a broad smile broke across the man's face. "I can only admire a woman with a strong intellect and a stiff spine. It seems Alma has taught you well." He sighed. "As to funds, I find myself a little underwater at the moment – so to speak. However, I could offer you some employment around town if you're interested."

"What kind of employment?" Eliza questioned with a raised

eyebrow.

"Nothing like Tollhouse Farm," Lord Baen amended quickly as he saw her expression. "Unless you prefer to handle such work, of course. I was actually thinking of smaller and more mundane tasks. Our house may not be what it once was, but I do still have some connections."

As Eliza waited for him to continue, he shifted nervously in his seat. "For example," he began, "I know that Tegan at The Seaman's Folly has been having trouble with our ship crews getting into fights with Lord Cairn's men. Someone with your particular skill set might be invaluable in resolving these brawls, and you could earn some easy coin."

Eliza pondered on this for a moment. Sitting in a tavern would give her a chance to work on her alchemy skills while still making money. Besides, there was probably a limit to how much trouble she could get into by simply keeping the peace. She could likely use her *Obscuring Mist* to take care of any unruly sailors while still keeping a low profile. No one needed to know where the mists came from after all.

"That sounds reasonable," Eliza said with a nod.

A grin split Lord Baen's face. "Fantastic. Then I believe we have an arrangement." He offered a hand to the water mage, a symbolic gesture to seal their deal.

She eyed his hand for a moment before accepting it. She still didn't trust Lord Baen, but as long as she was being cautious, she doubted that he would be able to pull something over on her again.

Having reached an agreement, Eliza made a hasty retreat from the office. As she stepped outside and the doors clicked shut behind her, she leaned back against the wall. Her heart was beating rapidly in her chest, and she felt like she had just run a marathon. That little confrontation had taken a lot out of her.

"Maybe I'm just really bad at this," she murmured, wishing that she had brought Alma along to help her. The older woman probably could have gotten a few more concessions out of the merchant.

At least she had these little odd jobs to look forward to. They seemed simple after everything else she had gone through and might help to take her mind off of what had happened at Tollhouse Farm. Besides, how much trouble could she really get into working at a tavern?

Epilogue

The Hippie stood atop the Baen Trading House, Fluffy sitting sedately beside him. Their gaze was focused on a young woman as she stepped out of the building and slowly made her way along the ridge looking out over Falcon's Hook's bay. The young woman edged away from the other travelers and residents, avoiding eye contact and pulling her cloak tightly around her to conceal her face and clothing.

"Well, that was certainly interesting!" the Hippie said, turning to glance at Fluffy. The sheep glared at him in reply, his expression skeptical.

"Okay, I might have pushed her a bit too much," the god replied to his pet's unspoken criticism.

Fluffy stamped a hoof and let out a soft snort.

"Fine, I pushed her way too far, but you have to admit that the results were spectacular! There is just something special about that girl," he murmured. On this at least, Fluffy agreed, the sheep nodding his head grudgingly as he turned his attention back to Eliza.

Without warning, the air beside the pair rippled and stretched, and the game world stuttered slightly. A moment later, an old man stood nearby. He wore a plain brown robe, his face obscured in shadow, and he held a roughhewn wooden staff in one hand.

"Ahh, you made it!" the Hippie said, grinning at the Old Man. "I was worried you were going to stand me up. That would have been rather rude, you know."

"You requested my presence, and so here I am," the dark god replied sourly, nodding at Fluffy in greeting. The sheep kneeled slightly in response, his forelegs buckling. "Now, what do you want?"

"Ahh, can't I just want to chat? Maybe I just missed my grumpy old brother, huh?"

The Old Man just stared at him for a long moment in reply.

"I can see that your sense of humor is still firmly dead and buried," the Hippie remarked with a growing grin. "Ha, get it? Because of the undead?"

When he saw that he was getting no reaction from the dark god, the Hippie sighed. "Anyway, to answer your question, I wanted to talk about the girl," he continued, gesturing at Eliza as she quickly retreated down the street.

The Hippie glanced sideways at the dark god. "Did you enjoy the show?"

"It was… fascinating," the Old Man admitted grudgingly.

“Although, I noticed you were forced to intervene.”

With a shrug, the Hippie replied, “A little bit of hand-holding is permitted, especially in these early stages. Or do you expect me to believe that your boy has made it as far as he has solely on his own steam? He just so happened to find the only reclusive necromancer near Lux? And I’m sure you had no hand in the events leading up to that unfortunate massacre.”

“You have made your point,” the Old Man replied curtly. “Still, you toed the line of violating the covenants. If our other siblings…”

The Hippie waved off his concern. “The others are too busy with their own problems to focus on little ol’ me. Besides, they have never taken me seriously.”

“And you are suggesting that I should?” the Old Man asked, skepticism lacing his voice. “What exactly do you want?”

“Hey, I’m the dark horse in this competition – the tortoise to everyone else’s hare. I’m wily,” the Hippie replied, waggling his eyebrows. Then a sly grin curled his lips. “But to get to the point, I would like to propose a partnership. I think my girl and your boy would make a great team.”

“The last time I checked, I was already firmly in the lead,” the dark god replied evenly, sparing a glance in the Hippie’s direction.

“Ahh, that’s true,” the Hippie replied, the colorful strips of cloth that made up his tunic flapping as he raised a single finger. “But, misfortune is always waiting just around the corner, and the others have been moving quickly in the background. The Lady is hot on your heels, and the Gypsy isn’t far behind…” he trailed off, watching the dark god closely.

The Old Man appeared to be weighing his words, but he hadn’t refused the Hippie’s offer. This point hadn’t gone unnoticed by the clownish god. With a snap of his fingers, he disappeared and reappeared beside the Old Man, placing his arm around the dark god’s shoulders. “Besides, wouldn’t it be fun to team up again? Remember the fun times we used to have? Two brothers against the world?”

“I seem to recall that you dropped the ball, or should I say the *orb*,” the Old Man replied grimly.

The Hippie grimaced slightly. “A small oversight, but my point still stands. A partnership would be to our mutual benefit. Plus, you’ve seen what the girl is capable of…”

A long, tense moment passed as the Old Man said nothing. Then he finally nodded curtly. “Fine. A partnership it is.” His head turned to look at the Hippie and Fluffy each in turn. “But if you think to double cross me…”

An offended look flashed across the Hippie’s face. “Me? I would never even consider such a thing.” He raised two fingers. “Scouts

honor!”

The Old Man snorted. “We will see. Just remember who you’re dealing with. I am not one of your playthings,” the Dark God growled. With that final statement, he abruptly disappeared – the air rippling slightly where he had stood only a moment before.

The Hippie turned his attention back to Eliza, watching as she turned a bend in the road and vanished from sight. A small smile graced the Hippie’s lips, and his eyes flashed a brilliant sapphire. Meanwhile, the black sheep glanced at him nervously.

“Don’t worry, Fluffy,” the Hippie murmured. “Our plan has already been set in motion…”

The End

Thank you for reading!

I hope you enjoyed the story! Ready to get back to our favorite necromancer? Here's a link to AO: Dominion!

Please leave a review!

I can't overstate how important these reviews are to making sure other people get a chance to read my story. I would also love to hear your thoughts - positive, negative or anything in between.

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